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JULY 2001

Murderers' Masquerade

in stories by

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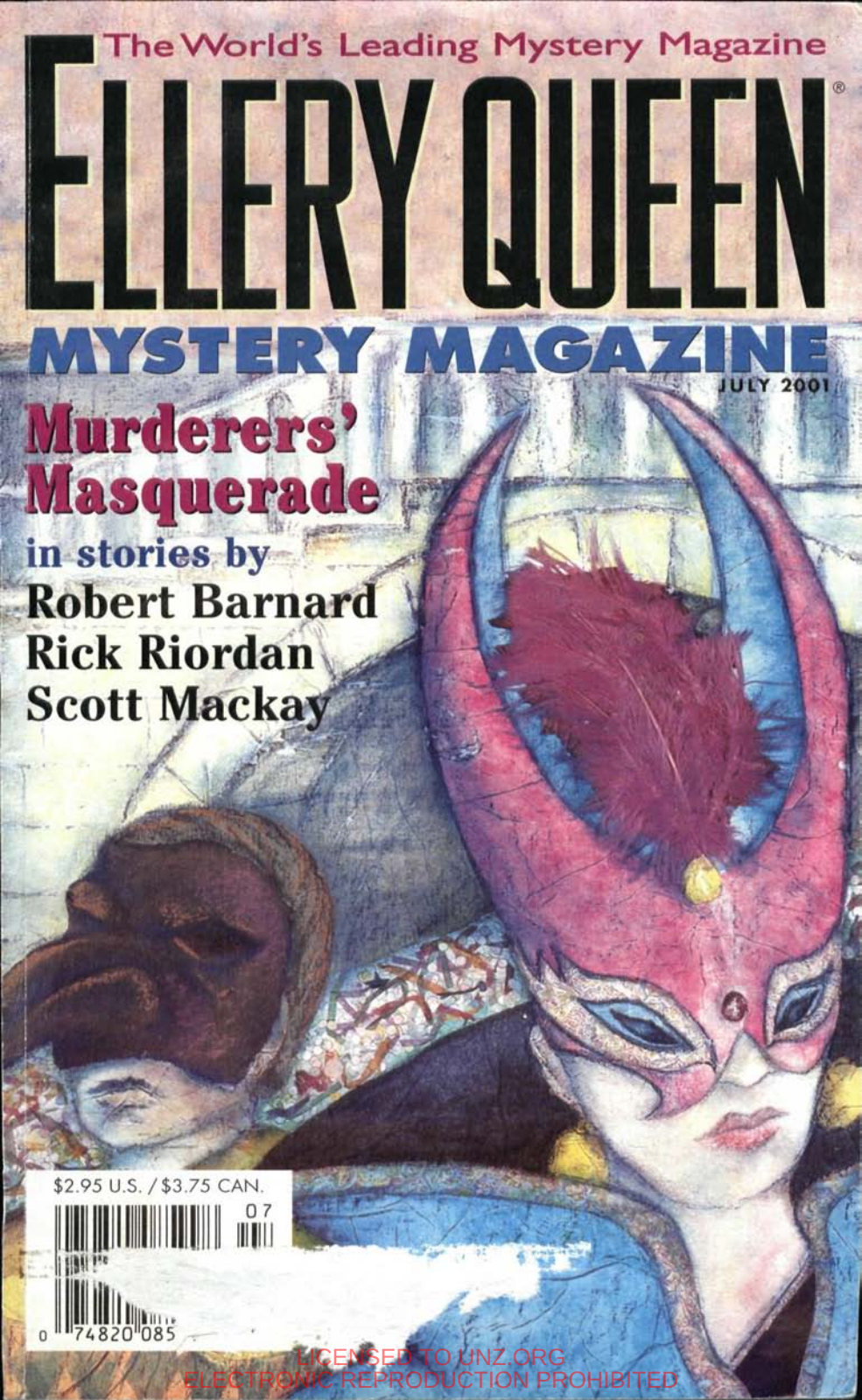

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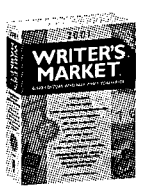

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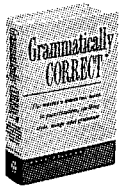

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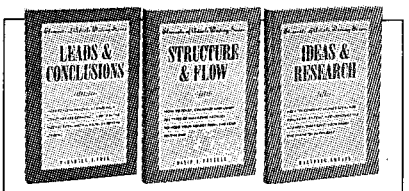

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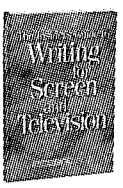

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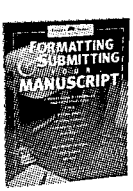

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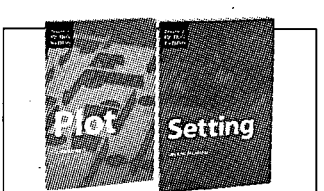

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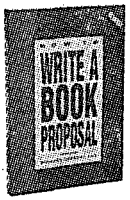

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THE PRIZED GENTLEMAN

by Rick Riordan

Indelicate, Mrs. Rind, my readers may protest, upon the publishing of this account. For without doubt, the recent affair of the prized gentleman may seem coarse printed upon these pages, especially in light of the feminine hand which now guides this *Gazette.*

Yet, I feel compelled to explain my involvement in so peculiar a tragedy and its resolution, as the murder has become a matter of some public curiosity. And therefore, if I may beg the indulgence of those patrons whose subscriptions have let me enjoy, to this time, some amount of public trust, I shall endeavor to lay the matter plain.

Monday morning last, I sat at the open window of my parlor, enjoying that precious half-hour I allow myself to knit and break fast before descending into the work of the printing office below stairs. The October air was pleasant, the great storm of the 2nd having but recently broken the summer's heat, as my readers will doubtless recall.

It was perhaps seven of the clock, and the Main Street filled

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with traffic, such as one could only find in this metropolis of over a thousand souls. I noted Colonel W—'s manservant Jupiter, upon some errand for his master. I observed Mr. R— in an open coach, en route to the Capitol where the Burgesses, no doubt, would be striving to bring closure to the much-publicized land dispute with Pennsylvania.

Miss Stapleton, who lets the cross-hall room, had checked our modest store of spices before leaving to market, and the scent of clove and nutmeg still hung pleasantly about the room. My oldest, Maria, was minding the pot over the embers—a light stew of chicken and dumplings from yesterday's dinner. John, Charles, and little James, under the care of twelve-year-old William, were tending our small patch of garden behind the house, unleashing their considerable juvenile energies upon the soil and their pet crop of Indian gourds.

Had I but a proper beverage, I would have been satisfied with the morning.

I hope the reader will not begrudge me this selfish sentiment, as I have ever supported the Associations, yet coffee is a bitter draught for a lover of English liberty. I do miss my tea.

I had yet to hear my Negro man Richard below stairs at his usual morning work of the presses. That regular and jarring percussion had become familiar music in this household, which noise my children likened to the slow, muddy stomping of a giant from Captain Gulliver's accounts. It was strange for Richard to be so late to his work, yet I did not find it sufficient impetus to stir so soon from my sunny window to investigate his tardiness.

My senses were pleasantly met with the clatter of hooves, voices of neighbors, and, above all, the pungent odor that hangs over all Virginia in the month of October—drying tobacco, in every rafter of every roof, in each warehouse, untold-thousand pounds of browning leaves, ready for the prizing.

Truly, October in Williamsburg fairly crackles with briskness, of fortunes to be made and crop notes to be circulated, new wealth and purchasing, the promise of which, like the cooled air, seems to lift months of toil from the backs of our citizenry.

Rick Riordan is the author of the Edgar, Anthony, and Shamus award-winning series of mystery novels featuring private eye Tres Navarre. Though he is continuing that series with the recent novel *The Devil Went Down to Austin* (Bantam, June 2001), he decided to experiment with a new genre, the historical mystery, in his first story for us. A middle-school teacher of American history, Mr. Riordan lives in San Antonio, Texas.

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As I was engaged in such trivial thoughts, none could have been more surprised than I to see the figure of Mr. H— approach my doorstep. That he should grace my home was an unexpected honor, and yet I fancy I may cast my lot with the sympathies of my feminine readers when asking if they, upon being so honored, would not as I did start like a mouse from the hay—here straightening my mobcap, there brushing my pinafore, sending my poor Maria into such a flurry of housekeeping that she no doubt thought the visit too important to be any but a suitor for herself.

It shall not surprise my readers to know that Mr. H— was simply yet impeccably dressed in a blue woolen suit, not being a man given to needless ostentation. Upon entering my home, he presented me his honors with a most elegant sweep of his hat.

Mr. H— had been kind to me in the recent months, following the death of my dear husband William, and had been most vocal in the House of Burgesses, urging the renewal in my name of my husband's license as public printer, an honor never before bestowed upon a woman.

Pleasantries exchanged and refreshment declined, my Maria dismissed to her spinning, Mr. H— came to the point. Indeed, I shall make the presumption of observing that Mr. H—, with his sharp brown eyes and his hawk's nose, his air of fiery certainty, has ever struck me as a man composed entirely of points.

"Mrs. Rind," said he, "a man has been murdered."

I said, "Indeed, sir?"

"I fear so," said he, his stentorian tone making it not difficult to believe, as rumor goes, that Mr. H— had listened to many a Presbyterian minister in his youth. "Not a hundred paces from the Palace Green. I blush to speak of this to a good and honest woman, but Necessity will allow no other course. The body was found at the tobacco warehouse near Mr. Atherton's field, the victim one John Trundle, a freeholder of the meaner sort."

The name producing only the most vague resonation in my memory, I had yet to receive any indication of why such a notable as Mr. H—, his past patronage of me notwithstanding, should bring such tidings to my parlor.

Mr. H— perceived my countenance and continued his oration as if to answer my unspoken query: "John Trundle had been strangled and then prized, Mrs. Rind—his lifeless body pressed into a hogshead of tobacco. Had the cooper not happened by and noticed the improper resealing of the lid, the unfortunate Mr. Trundle would have made good his name and been shipped to London on the morrow, and a murderer's deed well concealed for many months to come. The scene upon the opening of the barrel was one I shall not care to see again, nor shall I relate it to you now."

What rejoinder can one make to such news?

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And yet the horror of the discovery, which had so affected Mr. H—, did not repulse me so much as set fire to my curiosity. I confess I saw the account as if it were already printed in this *Gazette,* a story worthy of some notice to my subscribers.

"Sir," said I, "what brings you to me?"

Here Mr. H— flicked his knuckle beneath his nose, as he is wont to do in pauses between orations.

"Madam," said he, "this matter is delicate. Mr. Trundle was not unknown to me, nor was I entirely unfamiliar with his abilities as a man of travel."

Readers may make of this comment what they will. It bears note, however, that such an epithet has, in some circles, been used to indicate a courier for the committee of correspondence, late established to apprise our neighbors to the north of regulations and taxations here in Virginia—an effort not wholly looked upon with favor by His Excellency the Governor, Lord Dunmore. More Mr. H— did not say, nor would I attempt to lay plain his confidences and political sentiments in this *Gazette,* were there other words spoken to me on this subject.

I shall only say that Mr. H— made plain his interest in the unfortunate Mr. Trundle and gave me his hopes that speedy justice should be had, neither misdirected by the sheriff nor misrepresented in my humble forum.

"But, sir," said I again, "why come you here? I sense your interest goes farther than my writing of a treatise upon this event?"

The brown, hawkish eyes of the gentleman glittered, coming near, as I supposed, their rhetorical prey.

"For this reason, madam. A culprit has been taken, who was seen in the company of Mr. Trundle yesterday evening. It is a likely culprit, for Trundle was observed to quarrel with this man at no small length, even to the point of blows. The two persons had no reason to associate that any man might think good. Nor was this culprit found in any better condition than sleeping in a nearby ditch, with blood upon him, and in his pack several ozenbrig shirts, as well as several pounds of tobacco leaf which can be proved the same grade and quality as was found in the defiled hogshead."

"Why then, if a culprit is taken . . ." started I.

Mr. H— shook his head. "I am not happy with the choice of culprits, madam. Nor shall you be. This leads me to hope that, perhaps, we may make of this some common cause. Mrs. Rind, the culprit is none other than Richard, your Negro manservant."

I need not detail my arrangements with Miss Stapleton to look after the children, nor the thousand thoughts of despair which assailed me—first for my manservant, and then for my printing

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office, which would falter as surely as a drowned timepiece without Richard, and with that failure, all hopes of providing for my fatherless family.

Upon the way to the gaol, Mr. H— showed to me the spot of the murder. We observed the splintered white oak of the hogshead, the prizing machine with its long lever—a great weight upon one end, and a small, shingled roof at the other, covering the hogshead next to be filled. The apparatus had never struck me as sinister before. Rather that small roof, under which a thousand pounds of tobacco may be compressed into a barrel no larger than a goodly fireplace, had always seemed to me a metaphor for the roof over our heads, over each house in Williamsburg, and the tobacco the foundation upon which that roof is raised. Now, however, I could not escape the villainous image of a man crushed under the prizer's weight, reduced utterly, and I could not but wonder, with all the troubles and violence of late, if this burthensome image too held not some symbolism of our times.

His Honor the sheriff had but recently left the scene, having been satisfied, as we were told, with the capture of my manservant, and having resisted cries by some nervous parties to open all tobacco hogsheads in the public warehouse in search of further unfortunates.

Should you believe the wry report of one onlooker, the sheriff was heard to remark, "If there be other bodies, let our agents in London earn their commission. They have come near enough to selling our flesh and blood as 'tis."

The cooper, Samuel Pinkston, stood by the split-rail fence, relating his account to a curious passerby, and it seemed from Mr. Pinkston's immodest appearance that he had made his gruesome find in his nightclothes and not yet fully remedied his state of undress. His linen shift had been hastily tucked into breeches, the top hanging about him as the billowy clownish dress of a stick puppet in a children's entertainment. His face was unshaven, and his wild flaxen hair allowed to grow, like to crop of that name, in all directions at once.

Mr. Pinkston made a hasty and deferential bow to Mr. H—, then, I fancied, a somewhat less enthusiastic nod toward myself. As he did so, I noticed the several metal ornaments that adorned the cooper—a curved drawknife, symbol of his trade, and a pewter spoon in need of washing, both items hanging from his belt; a silver remembrance ring upon his hand; and about his neck, a chained token which I first mistook for a cross, but then saw it was a small brass tube, hooked at one end, as a whistle. With all these glittering bits, it was most difficult to focus on the man's words without distraction.

Mr. Pinkston recounted his tale of the previous night, of his tak-

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ing the air at one of the clock. (Though *taking the air* was the term used, the reader shall credit me as a woman with some years in the world and some familiarity with men, so that I heard plainly the meaning *carousing.)* Upon his way home, having stopped upon Nicholson Street to light his pipe, Mr. Pinkston had chanced to see Mr. John Trundle and his cousin, Mr. George Lewis, walking with lanterns across the way.

"They parted at the crossroads," said Mr. Pinkston, now pointing to the spot, now casting his red eyes at me. "As I stood there not twenty paces off, that Negro of yours came wandering up from the woods, back from some cutthroat business, I wouldn't doubt, and had the audacity to approach Mr. Trundle with demands. I could not hear the words in total, but 'twas plain the Negro wanted repayment of some debt, as if Mr. Trundle should ever deal with his sort. The Negro was quite fearsome in his aspect, so that I was preparing to come to the gentleman's assistance."

"Mr. Pinkston," said I, "Richard has been with my family for five years. Never once has he given us the least trouble, nor shown any but the kindest and gentlest inclinations to those who do not abuse him."

I put emphasis on the last words, hoping my meaning was as plain as proper etiquette allowed.

Yet this subtlety seemed lost upon Samuel Pinkston, who only raked his hair with his fingers, as if to satisfy himself that no two locks should be lying in the same direction.

"I know what my eyes showed me, Mrs. Rind," said he. "Your black monster—and a man of that size deserves the name—your 'gentle' slave fairly accosted Mr. Trundle to the point that the gentleman was obliged to apply his cudgel to the Negro's head and send him on his way with no small amount of pain for his presumptions. And then went I to bed, thinking the matter resolved to a good conclusion, my house being not far off."

And indeed that rude log structure presented itself to our immediate right, its fenced yard littered with iron hoops and half-formed barrels, puncheons and firkins, the staves blooming upward like strange flowers.

"Rising as I do in the early morning to be about my work," said the cooper, "I journeyed to the prizing station and noticed the seal amiss on the newest barrel. Prying it open—well, madam, I hope never to see that manner of sight again. I raised the alarm, and so was the miscreant abducted, and I shall attend his hanging, madam, that I promise."

As this good man, whom I shall allow that term as a Christian charity, had nothing more to tell us, save some embellishments on his warlike nature and his willingness to relive the event with a

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more satisfying confrontation with my servant Richard, Mr. H— and I proceeded on toward the gaol.

After some ten paces, Mr. H— remarked that he knew this Mr. George Lewis, in whose company Mr. Trundle had last been seen.

"A grasping man," Mr. H— informed me. "One of much credit and little ready cash."

Notwithstanding that Mr. H— had described by those words many a man in Williamsburg, I dutifully gave him my ear to continue.

"Mr. Lewis," said he, "owed some forty pounds tobacco to his cousin Mr. Trundle. I recall a suit brought before the court only last month. And, Mrs. Rind, these cousins had a falling out not two weeks hence upon the subject of our present troubles with England, as Mr. Lewis did strongly disagree with the enactment of any colonial measures but the present Associations, and in particular made clear his objections to Mr. Trundle's services to his fellow Virginians."

"As a man of travel," I speculated.

"Even so, madam. That these cousins were in each other's company last night I find peculiar. That they should be in amicable company I find impossible to believe."

"Is Mr. Pinkston's word to be taken, think you?"

Mr. H— pondered this for several paces, swinging his cane to one side, as if to threaten Mr. Atherton's split-rail fence.

"I think, madam," he said at length, "that Mr. Pinkston is a rascal, a known gambler, and one who lives from hand to mouth, having no great reputation as a master of his trade, yet I can hardly believe that he should have the wherewithal to act with such violence and decisiveness as to murder, if that is your meaning. Nor do I think it plausible he should then be the instrument by which the crime was made known, had he taken such great pains to conceal the body. Nay, Mr. Lewis is more like to the villainous deed I beheld this morning."

"And Mr. Trundle?" said I, pondering the story of his attack upon Richard, whom I could not believe guilty of any assault. "Forgive the inquiry, sir, if the gentleman had done you service, but was Mr. Trundle a decent man?"

I felt, from the flash in Mr. H—'s eyes, that I had touched upon a subject which was sore to him.

"Mr. Trundle was useful," he curtly replied. "He had a talent for finding needed goods and ready cash, and he had connections in many places. As to his moral character . . . one must make use of what tools one has in the name of a worthy cause. Surely you would agree, Mrs. Rind, that no man deserves the fate he received?"

It did not strike me as a statement in want of a reply, and so I

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offered none, though I began to wonder if perhaps my manservant's life were not in jeopardy for some great mistake of perception. I could not believe Richard had accosted a gentleman, nor in the least that he should shed blood. I resolved to call upon this Mr. George Lewis, should I be able to find a way by which a *femme sol* might creditably do so, but first the gaol beckoned.

Ere I continue this account, I should praise our gaoler, Mr. Prue, and his good family, for truly his job is much work and little recognition in the name of this colony. And so I hope he shall take it not unkindly when I say that I should never wish a woman to visit his establishment, nor can I fathom the strength of character it might take for his wife to raise her children there, with but a wall and a few chains between her precious charges and those charges of the crown which inhabit the other portions of the structure.

The wooden door was flung open to the outer shed, and the straw and heat, the raw smell of the interior, was sufficient assault upon my senses without the pleas for water, the wicked words, and the other shouts of villainy which accosted my ears from the denizens of that place. I raised my kerchief to cover my mouth and nose, but no perfume would dissolve the acrid stench.

No effect had this on Mr. H—, as I observed, nor upon Mr. Prue, who plunged within as a deft hand within a cage of fowl to pluck forth the next morsel.

Thus was Richard brought before us, and made to kneel in chains in the center of the yard. A sadder sight I have never seen, and hope not to have my heart made so heavy again.

Richard had never run away, and yet, printing runaway ads as I do so oft, for numerous subscribers, I had many times imagined what terms I should use to capture Richard's appearance and personality in as few words as possible, should I ever have the need. I fancied the following might suit:

A large Negro male about forty years, of a waxed mahogany complexion. A head which shall appear very full and bullish, with hair close-shaved and sprinkled with gray. Fearsome physique, with great strength as a field slave from many years working the Press, and yet has never shown violent inclination. Articulate of speech, with brown eyes that are quite intelligent. Bears the scars of three distinct lash marks across the back, given by previous owner. Can both read and write, and is facile with a number of mechanical trades, most particularly printing. Shall likely try to pass himself as a free Negro, as he is quite capable of producing an excellently forged pass, and shall probably endeavor to board ship to the West Indies, as he had a wife sold to that vicinity by previous owner five years hence.

And yet this work of imagination, so oft polished in my

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thoughts, did not adequately describe Richard's appearance that morning in the yard of the gaol. His manner was so changed, so horridly sad, that no advertisement could capture it.

Richard seemed no longer the imposing physical presence I had always thought him. Kneeling upon the straw, his hands clasped, his head bowed, he looked as broken a man as ever I beheld. About his head were great welts, put there, as I supposed, by Mr. Trundle's cudgel, so that his countenance was difficult to discern, and his left eye nearly closed with swelling. Most terrible to me, Richard wore my William's old shirt, a practice that had never caused me pain before, as the clothing served no other purpose now. But the shirt had blood upon it, and the sight of my deceased husband's shirt thus stained—upon my manservant most horribly abused—was almost more than I could bear.

Richard gazed at me miserably, by way, I thought, of silent plea, until Mr. Prue scolded Richard to avert his gaze from my own, lest he be whipped for insolence.

"That is not necessary, sir," said I.

I approached my manservant, each of my steps a heavy one. "Richard, I scarcely know how to begin."

"Missus Clementina," said he, "I didn't kill that man."

The words were said with such conviction, such indignation kept in check only by Richard's well-regulated temperament and the reality of his present condition, that had it been in my power, I should have judged him innocent on the spot.

Much to Mr. Prue's dissatisfaction, the gaoler being in no wise inclined to listen to testimony of a slave in chains, I urged Richard to recount his tale.

In so much did he agree with the remembrances of Samuel Pinkston, the cooper: that Mr. Trundle and his cousin Mr. Lewis had parted company upon the crossing of Nicholson and North England streets, and that Richard had directly approached Mr. Trundle upon the matter of a debt, and they had begun to argue. Mr. Trundle had used his cudgel to the effect that we now saw manifest upon Richard's head.

"You wished to collect a debt," scoffed Mr. Prue. "From a freeholder. What debt should he owe to the likes of you?"

I held Richard's eyes, seeing that we treaded upon some secret most painful to his heart, and yet silently urging him toward the full truth.

"Mr. Trundle has a friend," said Richard, "a boatswain on the *Indigo Jane.* Mr. Trundle told me this when he came to the printing office some months ago, wanting to subscribe an advertisement. He told me the boatswain had been to Antigua, and having a good mind for faces, he recognized my Sally there, working in the house of a sugar planter."

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And here my heartstrings were pulled taut, for Sally was Richard's wife, sold by their former master. Often had it grieved my husband and me, once we had learned Richard's story, and come to value his work, that the reunion of Richard and his wife was a matter beyond our financial abilities, even had we known the woman's whereabouts.

Richard continued, saying, "Mr. Trundle implied that for some cash, he could get a letter to my Sally, and bring one from her if she were inclined to send it. I gave him two shillings when the *Indigo Jane* last sailed a month ago, Missus Clementina. And you know that money was all I had—my savings."

Indeed I knew it was, and a goodly sum for a slave, as Richard was allowed to undertake occasional jobs of carpentry for his own profit when our *Gazette* and the public printing were done for the week.

"The *Indigo Jane* arrived back only this week," I remembered, nor could Richard have failed to notice the fact, as the announcement had been printed in our paper.

"I went to Mr. Trundle at once," Richard said, "two mornings ago—nice as I could—and asked, please, did he have any letter? He sneered at me, said that the boatswain wouldn't be making no more deliveries for him. Mr. Trundle said that he might have the letter, but the price had gone up. I told him I didn't have no more money."

Richard's hands had begun to tremble. "I went to him again last night, Missus Clementina, near crazy, thinking maybe he was lying about Sally."

"Hold your tongue!" Mr. Prue bellowed, but his gale quickly passed, finding nothing to resist it, and I gestured gently that Richard should continue.

"I needed that letter, Missus Clementina. And he hit me, told me to be off—but I swear, I didn't lay a hand upon him. I knew better than that."

Mr. Prue scoffed again, saying that Richard, having been found bloody, with tobacco in his pocket, asleep in a ditch, had lacked only motive for the murder, and that his present story supplied it most adequately.

And here Mr. H—, who had been so long quiet that I might have believed him an effigy, stepped forward.

"Richard," said he, "how came you to be found in the ditch?"

"I swear I don't know, sir. I was hit about the face, and there was blood in my eyes. I fell back, not wanting to give the appearance of defending myself. I stumbled and fell upon my knees. Mr. Trundle was cursing. I remember that. And then—I was knocked upon the head, sir, but I do not remember it. See here—this welt."

And indeed, the injury seemed far more severe than the welts

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and bruises about his face, quite sufficient to knock the senses from even a man as great as Richard.

"From your cudgeling," said Mr. Prue.

"Upon the back of the head?" said Mr. H—, and he did examine the wound. "And of such great force that it should knock a man unconscious? Should Mr. Trundle have succeeded in delivering this blow, how then would this slave kill him, much less dispose of the body in so villainous and intricate a manner as we have seen? Even had Richard not been knocked unconscious, should he not have been dazed, at least, and thus unfit to complete and conceal his crime?"

Thus did Mr. H— reveal both his legal training and his inclination to orate, which quite overwhelmed the poor Mr. Prue, as Mr. H— did make of him jury, and audience, and opposing debater.

"No," said Mr. H—, here concluding with a finger toward my manservant. "If Richard were indeed knocked out, 'twould take a man of considerable strength and advantage, with a large implement, and with purpose to lay Richard low, possibly with the knowledge that he could then hang many sins upon his unfortunate black skin. A man could silence Richard, and then Mr. Trundle, and lay the blame for his second victim easily upon the first."

Here I added, "I cannot believe Richard would assault a man, Mr. Prue. Nor do I intend to lose his services for a miscarriage of justice."

"Madam," protested Mr. Prue, this sole word being all he could muster for a rejoinder.

"Is it not so, gentlemen," I asked, "that we have had several burglaries of late in Williamsburg, committed by a villain not as yet apprehended?"

Mr. Prue agreed that it was so, for such had been much the talk of the capital. Mr. H—, too, agreed to the veracity of my statement, though he did not seem enthusiastic concerning this line of questioning.

"Is it not then possible," said I, "that this same villain, emboldened by his late successes, did murder Mr. Trundle for his purse, and perhaps accosted Richard as well?"

"Rob a slave?" Mr. Prue asked. "Madam, you might as well rob a mule."

And here I could see the strain in my manservant's jaw and shoulders.

"Perhaps, perhaps, Mrs. Rind," said Mr. H—, his tone one of conciliation. "The point being, Mr. Prue, that there are unexplored questions."

And here Mr. H— turned toward me, his predatory eyes aglitter, making me quite glad I was not the object of their hunger.

"I think, madam," said he, "that we should visit Mr. George Lewis."

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There hangs in my printing office below stairs an engraving by Samuel Hogarth, signed by the artist—a gift from Mrs. Paradise, our landlord, who spends most of her year in London and returned some small favors my husband had done her with this most extraordinary gift.

The engraving is an old one, entitled "A Midnight Modern Conversation," and examining the faces of the characters, I never cease to marvel at the artist's ability to capture the grotesque possibilities of the human form.

Why I mention this upon recounting my visit to Mr. George Lewis I shall leave to the reader to interpret, as it is not within the scope of polite discourse to make the connection plain.

His small brick house, with its single chimney and gable, sat upon North England Street, so near the governor's palace that it might be fancied a poor stepchild of that great edifice.

As we were met by Mr. Lewis, I recalled where I had encountered him before, remembering an advertisement he had placed a year ago—*For Sale, a dark bay mare, four years old, appraised at ten pounds.* I was taken to remembrance of Mr. Lewis's debts at that time, of such an extent that he had been obliged to part with some of the finer trappings he had earned as agent for a group of land speculators, who had since dispensed with his services. By the state of his clothes when he greeted us, the furniture within his parlor, and the lack of all cloth and draperies, I took the unhappy impression that the last year had not improved the gentleman's lot. Over his mantel, rather than portrait or fowling piece, the gentleman had upon display a walking stick of thick oak, cunningly carved so that the head resembled a bear. What statement I should take from this of Mr. Lewis's character I was not sure.

He entreated us to sit, and yet I perceived a most definite coldness in his demeanor toward Mr. H—, which far out-froze the autumn weather.

Mr. Lewis's wig sat upon his head at a slight tilt, like a poorly laden ship, and it took much effort upon my part not to correct the picture by tilting my own head accordingly when I looked upon him.

Mr. Lewis was most grudging in his information about his dear cousin Trundle, whose name he spoke with so little apparent affection that it was evident he would need no great counseling to overcome his grief.

"I can tell you nothing," said he, "save that I left John upon the road, and went directly home, where I slept until woken by the sheriff's manservant, telling me of the manner in which they had

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found my cousin. What, Mr. H—, had he business with you that he did not conclude?"

This last spoken with so sharp a point that no great trust of Mr. H— nor his "business" could have been mistaken.

Mr. H—'s temperament remained even, however. "Mr. Lewis," said he, "you live alone?"

The question caused Mr. Lewis's face to redden, and his considerable girth to tremble. "By this, what do you imply, sir? That I have no longer any servants? That is true. I was obliged to sell them. Is this then a crime, when my circumstances are so reduced by those who, because of political winds, choose to call me out of favor because I shall not be blown on an errant course? Such men were my former employers, and, I might add, my cousin."

Mr. H— assured him that he meant no slight, but only wondered if any had seen him return to home. Mr. Lewis said that he had come home entirely alone, and that his word as a gentleman would have to suffice.

"This is upon the assumption," Mr. Lewis added icily, "that the word of a gentleman is accepted—by a gentleman."

Mr. H— turned his eyes to the walking stick above the mantel, his gaze of sufficient power, I feared, to carve a few new lines in the object.

Seeing this, I ventured to question Mr. Lewis myself.

Upon the matter of his past debts to Mr. Trundle, George Lewis insisted that these had been settled to their mutual satisfaction, and that their meeting last night was one of friendship and reconciliation.

"We disagreed upon many things," said Mr. Lewis. "I did not favor the extremes to which John would go to earn ready cash, as I should rather be poor and honest. Nor did I appreciate his ungratefulness, as he would be no freeholder had I not acquired his acre in town and his hundred in the country for him, through my own connections—and then to sue me for a small debt!"

Here did Mr. Lewis collect himself slowly, as if that errant wind of which he had spoken had taken him by surprise. "Yet John was my cousin, and I am as loyal to my kin as I am to the crown. Should all men be able to speak likewise."

It should be noted that Mr. H— still kept his fiery nature in check, which for its heat could as easily have changed mercury as all of Mr. Lewis's cold.

It being most plain by Mr. Lewis's expression that our time together had come to a close, Mr. H— and I took our leave, feeling in no wise satisfied with our discoveries.

Upon the road once more, Mr. H— escorting me back to home, he remarked, "A large man, Mr. Lewis."

"Yes," said I. "Of considerable size."

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"With powerful hands," Mr. H— added, and then remarked upon the gentleman's walking stick that hung above the mantel, implying it was of a great enough size to suit its master.

"Surely, sir," said I, "you do not think it to be the guilty instrument which knocked Richard to unconsciousness, hung so boldly in a man's home?"

Mr. H— gazed at an approaching carriage, and did not answer my query until the horses had passed us. "Nay, madam. Not that stick, nor is its display in his home suspicious, taken alone. Mr. Lewis has ever had a walking stick in his possession. It is a most familiar part of his attire, as many a bruised sailor who has felt its weight may attest."

"Why then, sir?"

"My concern," he said, by no means finished, "is that Mr. Lewis's normal stick is capped with silver, and of an entirely different wood. I observed it in his hands only last week. I wonder when he began hanging a new one above his mantel, and where the old one might have gone."

He left me to ponder this thought as we walked together toward the Ludwell-Paradise House, where my family waited for me.

I can confess to no rest that evening.

My children, having filled their day with chores under the stern direction of Miss Stapleton, went to bed quickly enough after only a short reading from Mr. Defoe, and yet in the remaining light of evening I could neither bring myself to do the work of the printing office nor of the hearth, both so desperately wanting after a day's idleness.

As night fell, I could think only of poor Richard, and what view he might have out the single barred window of the jail, how he would suffer from the oppressive heat and smell and crowding of that place. I knew full well that his greater agony was within, staring as he would into the darkness and thinking not of his injuries, but of a woman in Antigua, for a few words from whom he had given his life savings. And for this he had found himself imprisoned, with no future hope but judgment and gallows.

I thought of Mr. H— and his fierce convictions against Mr. Lewis.

And other thoughts gave me misgivings—of the devious Mr. Trundle, who had so played upon poor Richard's hopes, and whom Mr. H— had called useful. I could not escape the image of this man, Mr. Trundle, being pressed into a hogshead—being a man I had never met yet had learned, in the course of the day, to dislike and to feel, I am ashamed to say, no great sorrow at his demise.

At last, I donned skirt and bodice over my shift, pulled upon me my cloak, and called my eldest, Maria, to the fire, telling her that I

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should be gone but a little while, as I feared I had neglected a very important piece of business with Mr. H—.

Maria looked chary at this, and indeed in no small amount vexed, that I should now break the injunction I had so often lectured her upon—that a woman should not venture out at night alone, in particular not with the purpose of visiting a man, lest public scorn be heaped upon her. And yet Maria offered nothing but a forced, dutiful response, which is the most a mother can expect of a girl of that age, saying that she would stay by the hearth and await my return.

Indeed, I thought to myself upon leaving, it should not be the first time I had been forced to do more than the proper compass of a woman might allow since the death of my husband, and I beg my readers to consider the circumstances which drove me to this extremity—the impending loss of our manservant being no small tragedy after so much had already befallen the Rind household.

I walked into the Main Street, the air now quite brisk, so that I felt a living teapot, issuing steam with each breath and step. I sped my way past the taverns, the closed shops and homes, the occasional tableau which candlelight presented in the casement windows, and thus to the Raleigh, where I had it of good information that Mr. H— was lodging while in the city from his home at Scotch Town.

The Raleigh's doorman started at my appearance—but whether from my dress, or my sex, or my desire to speak with Mr. H— I cannot know.

In but a few moments, Mr. H— descended from above stairs to greet me. His fingers were stained with ink from, I imagined, his evening correspondence. He wore a banyan of darkest indigo and a negligee cap ditto, so that one might have fancied him the unlikely secretary of some Turkish pasha.

And yet he did not look surprised by my calling, nor ask after my intent, but allowed himself a thin smile as if to infer that he had somehow expected me.

"Mrs. Rind," he said, "I see we think alike. Did you not feel we should perhaps pay a friend a visit, in circumstances more friendly to a discreet conversation?"

I started at this, for truly it was a canny prediction of my thoughts, and yet before I could launch inquiry, Mr. H— said, "You will excuse me."

Thereupon he disappeared upstairs, to return a few minutes later not visibly changed in attire, but his great inky banyon now tied loosely about the waist, and perhaps his gait a bit stiffer, as if he had changed his breeches to ones of chain mail.

"The rogue saw something!" he pronounced. "And we shall have it from him."

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At this I could only nod, as Mr. H—, in his enthusiasm, took my arm and led me hence into the night, the sight of us together giving the doorman a look of greater surprise than he had heretofore affected.

We took, as I fancied, the very route Mr. Trundle and Mr. Lewis must have ventured the night before: down the Main Street and across several dark alleys and private gardens to Nicholson Street, which was darker still, so much so that I felt very grateful for my companion, yet still I did fear that some cutthroat might jump from the woods, and we not have the benefit of a heavy cudgel.

We proceeded safely to the crossing of the roads, which was but a few easy steps to the prizing machine and tobacco storehouse, and only a few feet further to the house of the cooper, Samuel Pinkston.

Much to my own surprise, I found Mr. H— again reading my thoughts, and proceeding to the door of the cooper's abode and knocking. There came no answer but that the door, which was indeed an object as little like the name "door" as a net is like a fully woven drapery, swung open of its own accord, revealing the rough habitation within—a floor of dirt, a single table of hewn logs, a rope bed, and a great stone fireplace whose embers provided the room with scant reddish light. The table and floor were strewn with the tools of a cooper—jiggers and crozes and drawknives of various curvatures. Buckets were placed about the floor to catch, as I suppose, rainwater from the poorly joined roof.

Mr. H—, as it seemed, had little compunction against entering the cooper's home, and I, with no other option save remaining in the dark yard alone, felt obliged to follow him within.

"Well," said Mr. H—, rubbing his hands together. "This is where you thought to come, is it not?"

"It is, sir," said I. "And yet, how did you know?"

Mr. H— smiled, seeming more animated than I had ever beheld him. "He is too close, madam, his walls too thin even were he within them, not to have heard a further disturbance upon the accosting of your manservant. Yet Mr. Pinkston is not the sort to give his information without a price, and so we must find the price and exact from him the truth! We shall find, I don't doubt, that Mr. Lewis was not in bed last night, as he claimed, nor did he part company with Mr. Trundle for any long space of time."

I did not answer, yet went to the rough-hewn table, where I found the small piece of brass I had observed Mr. Pinkston to wear that morning—a tube, like a whistle.

I said, "Mr. H—, were you the owner of this house, where would you keep your valuables?"

Mr. H— studied me then for some time, wondering no doubt at the meaning of my question, and thinking, as I hoped, that the Widow Rind should make a most unlikely candidate for the bur-

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glar who had late made the town uneasy.

"I know not, madam," said he. But he did not ask my intent, only casting about the dark room for a long while, his eyes in the firelight appearing even more predatory than was usual. "I should think a loose board in the wall. Or perhaps . . ."

And as his voice trailed away, I followed his gaze. His eyes had fixed upon a barrel lid high in the rafters, put directly above Mr. Pinkston's chair to serve, as one might suppose, as umbrella against the rain through the imperfect roof. The lid was a good ten feet high, not easily accessed, and yet one could imagine that it should make an excellent place of storage, above most prying eyes. Indeed, I fancied, even in the dark shadows of the room, that I could apperceive something atop the lid—something like a box.

"Mrs. Rind," said my companion, "why do you ask after Mr. Pinkston's valuables?"

He spoke as if measuring each word for just the proper fit, like a milliner short on good cloth.

"This reason, sir," said I, holding up the brass tube, "which Mr. Pinkston was wearing this morning."

"A trinket," Mr. H— remarked. "A whistle, is it not?"

"Yes, sir, and to one who does not see many ships' captains, placing many subscriptions, the object might not immediately strike one as a boatswain's whistle, and yet such it is."

Mr. H—'s demeanor transformed. "Mr. Trundle's friend upon the *Indigo Jane* was a boatswain. Your manservant Richard claimed as much, saying that this boatswain was the conveyance by which he expected Sally's letter."

"Even so, sir. Strange that a cooper should have such a whistle."

"And yet surely, madam, such an item is not uncommon and might easily be won in a game of chance, or borrowed. Nor would even the stealing of it be sufficient to prove connection between a man and the murder of Mr. Trundle."

"Perhaps not," said I. "And yet, having seen Mr. Pinkston's predisposition for trinkets, much as a raven, I should wonder what else could be found in his nest."

And so again our eyes lifted to the barrel lid in the rafters.

I could see that Mr. H— was loathe to change the course of his suspicions, much as a racing horse presented with an obstacle on his normal track. His desire was very great to capture Mr. Lewis in some crime.

And yet soon had we, with great lack of legal authority, I shall confess, borrowed Mr. Pinkston's only chair and proceeded by many dangerous acrobatic maneuvers to dislodge a strongbox from its aerie.

So engrossed was I in this operation that though I smelled burning tobacco, I did not think of it. Indeed, the rafters being so full of

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dried tobacco, the product, as I guessed, of a small private patch, like many men in the town kept, I may have fancied my nose deceived me.

Within the strongbox found we numerous articles of value—a gentleman's snuffbox, five Spanish mill dollars, and a Portuguese cruzado. There was one other item the sight of which made Mr. H— start, that being a small silver buckle, with the initials J.T. clearly engraved upon it.

"John Trundle," said he. "I have seen this upon his person on many occasions. Madam, I must apologize. I came here to gain testimony, and I shall leave having found a murderer."

Then said a voice, "No, Mr. H—. In fact, you shall not leave at all."

Thus did we start, dropping the trinkets we had recovered, at the voice of Mr. Pinkston, who stood in the doorway of his home, his face lit only by the fire, which also illumined the pipe in his one hand and the dagger in his other.

Mr. H— showed not the slightest inclination for fear, and took to berating our murderous host thus:

"You, Pinkston, have been busy at more than barrels, I see. I think the hanging you attend shall not be this woman's slave's. It shall instead be your own."

Pinkston sneered, tossing his pipe to the dirt, and for the first time I realized how large his hands were—the hands of a man quite used to bending wood to his will, forming the great ribs of the barrel and making the straight into something bent, which seemed now to me a fitting profession for one of his secret villainy.

I realized how easy a time he could make of us both—a woman and Mr. H—, a gentleman of the law rather than of physical exertion. And should we cry for help, there would be no one to hear but the tobacco fields and animals and the abandoned prizing station, this portion of Nicholson Street being most thoroughly deserted at night.

"I had contented myself with trinkets until last night, Mr. H—," said the cooper. "My business prospects being what they were, I had no choice, you see, but thievery, debtor's prison, or fleeing to the frontier. And so, steal I did. But then I found that the more lucrative sins of robbery and murder suit me quite well."

"You are the rogue who has stolen so much of late, then," Mr. H— ventured, not the least deterred by Pinkston's leer.

"I am, sir. But witnessing what I witnessed last night—the Negro assaulting Mr. Trundle, and this after Trundle and Lewis had only just laughed at my expense in the tavern, taking a large sum from me in gambling, with Trundle all the while boasting of his fight with a boatswain he knew, as if to indicate he had done away with the wretch and gotten a goodly weighted purse for his troubles . . . well, sir. I followed behind Lewis and Trundle when

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they left the tavern, not sure what my purpose yet might be, but searching for opportunities. And as it played out, I could hardly resist. Mr. Trundle left the Negro at my mercy, you see—quite dazed, and upon his knees. It was a simple matter to fetch a stave, cross the street, and complete Trundle's work with a blow to the back of the Negro's head. Then I followed Mr. Trundle but a little ways toward home and strangled him, breaking his neck, and thus dragged him toward the prizing machine. I meant only to leave the body, but then I saw the half-filled barrel, and the prizing seemed the most fitting way to hide him. I went then and disposed of the Negro as might make for the best guilty appearance. Only in the morning, when I realized the seal of the hogshead was very poor, the traces not so clean, did I think it would be best I discovered Trundle myself, and thus play out the thing as best I could."

"You are quite mad," said I.

The expression upon Pinkston's face did nothing to convince me to the contrary.

"I shall not hang, madam," said he, here taking several menacing steps in my direction. "I shall enjoy the irony of sailing tomorrow upon the *Indigo Jane,* and before, I shall have that ring upon your finger for my collection. And as for your protector, Mr. H—"

But here was he stopped short, for Mr. H— had calmly produced that article from his cloak which he had obviously returned to the upstairs room at the Raleigh for—a flintlock dueling pistol.

"You, Pinkston," said Mr. H—, "shall have this remembrance of me. Now step away from Mrs. Rind."

I can hardly relate with proper words His Honor the sheriff's amazement when, in the middle of the night, Mr. H— of the House of Burgesses and the Widow Rind of the *Virginia Gazette* called upon him, leading Mr. Samuel Pinkston at the point of a flintlock.

Mr. Prue, the gaoler, was summoned with a sturdy set of irons, a confession was had from Pinkston, and my manservant Richard was brought forth to me and released from his chains, bringing the matter to a very satisfactory conclusion.

Among the articles found in Mr. Pinkston's nest of treasures was none other than the letter brought by the boatswain to Mr. Trundle, in which correspondence Richard's wife Sally did pour out her heart's affections to her good and true husband. And the poor boatswain himself, as I later heard, was found in a ditch upon the Yorktown road, the apparent victim of John Trundle, who, by strangling his erstwhile friend, had proven to augur the means of his own demise.

The following day, I was able to enjoy my coffee at the parlor window with considerably lighter heart, and delighted in the sound of my children in the garden, and even of Maria, who was

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now fussing about the hearth and brushing her clothes in a most absent manner, having the possibility of a caller of her own that afternoon—the silversmith's journeyman.

Richard professed that he never could thank me sufficiently, though I told him it was no matter for gratitude, as I valued him so highly that it was I who most benefited from his release.

"Still, Missus Clementina," said he, "I thank you, ma'am. A better Christian woman and gentler mistress there never was. Thank you, for me and my Sally."

Yet I wondered as he looked at me whether there was not a new depth of sadness in his brown eyes, a look of greater distance that was the result of the letter from Sally, which had both freed him and made him feel more heavily than ever the truth of his bondage. And as much as I needed him, now more than ever, I feared the sadness in him, and loathed the very necessity that made me keep him. I wondered, I must be honest—even though Richard shall read this, and set with his own hands the very letters that imprint this page—whether I should ever need that advertisement describing him which I had so long imagined.

Mr. H— seemed well disposed to overcome his disappointment in not catching Mr. Lewis guilty of the crime, though I did hear that Mr. Lewis and he came to words upon the Palace Green a few days thereafter, only narrowly escaping the challenge of a duel by the intervention of their friends.

Upon our next meeting on the Main Street, I expressed to Mr. H— my intent to publish this account, offering that he might peruse the wording beforehand so that I might acceptably represent him, and I shall never forget the curious look on his face.

"I have never been one for notes, Mrs. Rind," said he. "I speak from my mother wit, extempore. I am not at all certain I should care to see my words or deeds frozen in correspondence. For indeed, I fear I should be an impossible editor to satisfy, as I would think nothing sufficed to capture the reality of the moment. Write your piece, therefore. I shall not be the gatekeeper of your words."

And indeed, I shall honor Mr. H— with the observation that no written correspondence can capture the man, nor has he raised the slightest objection to my rights to publish this account.

According to Mr. Prue, Samuel Pinkston shall be with him yet some little time, as his crime must come before the General Court, and Mr. Prue expects an excellent turnout for the hanging, when that time arrives.

Thus the unfortunate incident of the prized gentleman was concluded, as is evidenced by this article, published the Friday next after the event, thanks in no small part to the tireless efforts of my manservant Richard, whose freedom was the happy outcome.

And so I shall end, with the reminder that additional copies may

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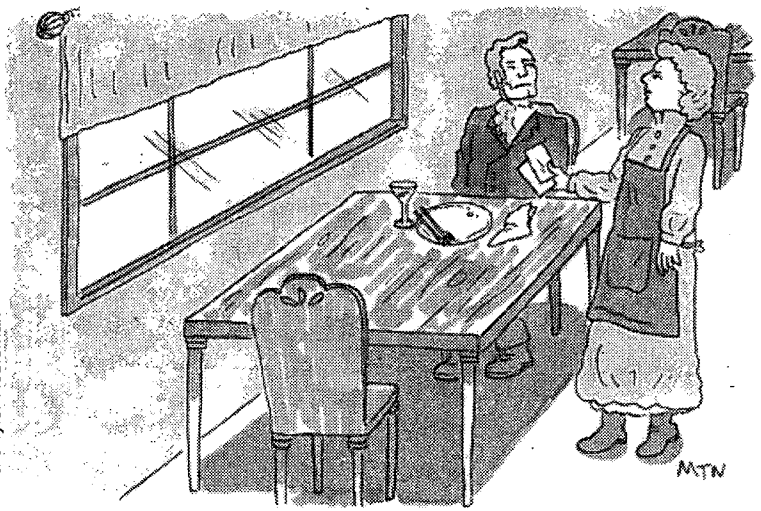
be had at the NEW PRINTING OFFICE, on the Main Street, and that all persons may be supplied with this *Gazette* at 12 shillings 6 pence per year.

I am with great Respect,
The Public's most faithful,
And most obedient,

CLEMENTINA RIND

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Though Mrs. Rind is careful, in eighteenth-century fashion, to mask the names of certain influential persons in her story, modern readers may wish to know that Colonel W— is George Washington, then a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses and a colonel in Virginia's militia. Mr. R— is Peyton Randolph, long-time Speaker of the House of Burgesses, and one of the most powerful men in the colony. Mr. H— is Patrick Henry, already a famed defense attorney and Virginia burgess by the time of this story, October 1773. Henry had a reputation as a firebrand and a great orator, though his famous "Give me liberty or give me death" speech would not be delivered for another year and a half. The author wishes to thank John Chadwick of the Colonial Williamsburg Teacher Institute for his help.



Marc Tyler Nobleman

"Separate checks as always, Dr. Jekyll."

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SARATOGA STEAL

by Edward D. Hoch

I was getting too old for the private-detective business, and on days like this I was well aware of it. The tall brunette came through the door like a fashion model on the runway, wearing a black silk dress that fit her like a glove. She took one look at me and said, "I'm here to see the young one."

"That would be my partner, Mike Trapper," I told her. "He just went downstairs for coffee. He'll be right back. Have a seat."

She eyed the two faded leather chairs opposite my desk and finally chose the one that looked less worn. "You're Mr. Darlan?"

The following tale is the 16th story Ed Hoch has written about his private eye Al Darlan, but it is the first to appear in *EQMM*. For his work on this series and on other nonseries stories, Mr. Hoch recently received "The Eye," the life achievement award of the Private Eye Writers of America. Over the years, the Darlan stories have appeared in *Manhunt*, *AHMM*, *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine*, and various other magazines and anthologies.

"Al Darlan, yeah. Darlan and Trapper. We've been in business for over a decade now, and before that it was just me." Sometimes it was still just me, when Mike and his wife were off on a trip somewhere. His family had money, but I didn't begrudge him that. I'd been on my last legs financially when he turned up fresh out of Cornell and told me he wanted to learn the private-detective business rather than follow his dad into the legal profession. He had money to invest and a willingness to learn. I took him in, trained him until he could get his license, and then changed the name on the door.

"I don't really know if I've come to the right place. It seems foolish to be hiring a private detective for this."

"What's the nature of your problem?" I asked.

"I'm a writer," she began.

Just then the door swung open and Mike Trapper came in carrying two cups of coffee. He was tall and blond and a quarter-

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century younger than me. I could understand why she'd wanted the young one. Mike set down the coffee cups and took in the tall brunette. "I'm sorry. You must be Amy Jordan. I didn't expect you till eleven."

"I know. I got here sooner than I planned."

"We can go into my office if you wish."

I opened the lid on my coffee. "I'd like to sit in on this if you have no objection, Miss Jordan."

"No," she answered a bit uncertainly. "Of course not."

"We can stay right here, then. That all right, Mike?"

"Sure. I'll get my pad." He disappeared into his office and returned toting a yellow legal pad and some sharpened pencils, the only reminders of his aborted legal career. "Now then, Miss Jordan. It is Miss, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"You said on the phone that you were a fiction writer."

"That's correct. I've had three books published by Neptune in New York."

"Romances?"

She reddened slightly. "No, actually they're so-called caper novels. Not the sort you'd expect a woman to be writing, I suppose."

"You mean about robberies?"

"Well, yes." She began to warm to the conversation, losing her nervousness. "I start with an actual situation in a real city and plan the book's crime around it. Of course, I put in a lot of good characterization, too. They're more than just thrillers."

"Do you write under your own name?"

"Of course. Women writers are big in the mystery field right now. My first novel, *The Raleigh Robbery,* won an award for the best first mystery of the year. Last year I published *The Louisville Larceny,* and it got up to ninth on the *New York Times* bestseller list. *The Charleston Caper* was published two months ago, back in June. I went on a book tour and it was really successful. In Charleston there were more men than women wanting my autograph."

Looking at her, cool and crisp on this warm August Monday, a perfect model of poised beauty, I could understand why. I wouldn't have been surprised to hear that more than one of her book customers had invited her out to dinner. "Have you started your next book yet?" I asked.

"Well, yes. And that's what I'm here about. I do a great deal of research on my novels, usually staying in a city for a week or two gathering background material. I have a laptop computer and I take it with me, getting a start on the book while I'm in the city. I came to you because I believe someone is trying to steal the plot for my next novel."

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I was a bit dubious. "Would anyone actually do that? Couldn't they just think up their own plot?"

Before she could answer, Mike gave me an unhappy frown and took back the conversation. "What city is your new book set in?"

"I'm calling it *The Saratoga Steal.* It's set in Saratoga during the racing season."

"That's a common enough setting," Mike told her. "I think I've read a couple of mysteries set there."

"My books aren't really mysteries. I have no series sleuth chasing clues. As I said, they're caper novels. Two or more criminals come together and plan a big robbery. I've been staying at the Yaddo writers' colony in Saratoga this whole month. I'd already chosen the town as my setting, and staying there helped me develop the plot. I had to come back home for a couple more signings, but I hope to return there for the rest of August. My studio is waiting for me."

"Do they let you keep a key to it?"

She shook her head. "No, I'll have to check in first at the mansion."

"What do you do at a writers' colony?" I asked. "Talk to other writers? Compare notes?"

"There's very little of that," she assured me. "There's a big house, a mansion really, and forty studios for artists, composers, and writers scattered through the woods around the property. Some guests have rooms at the house, but most of us prefer our own cottage studios where we can write and paint and sleep without interruption. Mine has a cute sunburst painted on the door by a previous artist. There are elaborate gardens on the property that are open to the public, but the mansion and the studios are off-limits. We might see each other for the family-style breakfast and dinner, but that's all. Lunch pails are delivered to our door while we work. The racetrack is right next to us, through a lot of woods. Sometimes when the wind was right I could hear the crowd cheering on the winners."

"Sounds great," Mike said.

"The trouble is that since I returned from Saratoga last week someone has been reading my notes on my computer."

"How can you be sure?"

"I always close my laptop when I finish using it. Always! Last Friday I came home and found it open. Someone had been in there to read what I'd written."

"You might have forgotten to close it," he suggested.

"I didn't, but just to make sure I stuck a hair to the lid when I went out to shop on Saturday. I came home two hours later and the hair had been pulled loose."

I nodded. I supposed it was the sort of thing a mystery writer

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would think to do. "You don't need a code word to gain access to your files?"

She shrugged. "I never thought I needed one. I live alone. I figured if someone wanted my computer they'd steal the whole thing. I do print out the new pages of my draft each night and lock those away."

Mike made a few notes and asked, "Does anyone besides you have a key to your apartment?"

"It's not an apartment. I bought a small house last year out near Cedar Park. I have the only key."

"Any signs of forced entry?"

"None," she told him. "If there were, I'd have called the police, not you."

I decided to take over again, even though it brought a frown from Mike. "What about visitors? Who was in your house last week?"

"Well . . . my boyfriend Rich and my sister Kate. Those are the only ones, really."

"Were they there together?"

"No, Kate's never met him."

"What's this boyfriend's name?" I asked.

"Rich Bombalay. I met him at one of my signings a couple of months back, and he drove up to Yaddo and took me out to dinner one night. It's nothing serious, though."

Rich. I wrote the name on my pad. No one was ever called Dick anymore unless they were my age. "Did he ever stay the night?"

Her face clouded with anger. "Rich had nothing to do with this, and no, he never stayed the night, neither here nor at Yaddo."

Mike cleared his throat. "If you could just give us his address, and that of your sister as well—"

"Sure." She took a piece of paper and wrote them down.

"As I understand it, you'd like me to keep an eye on your house while you're out and try to catch anyone who's getting in."

"That's right. I'm at a crucial stage in the writing now, and I'm pretty sure whoever's doing this will be back."

Mike went on to discuss our fee structure. Back when I started the business, I was getting fifty dollars a day plus expenses. He quoted five hundred a day plus expenses, plus something he called "hazard pay."

"What's that?" she asked.

"If it becomes necessary to use weapons."

"Oh hell!"

"It's just part of the contract. We rarely—"

"All right. How much retainer?"

"A thousand. When will you be going out again?"

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"Tomorrow. I want to see my agent about the new book contract." She wrote out a check and handed it over.

"I'll be in touch," Mike promised.

When she'd gone he asked me what I thought. I walked to the window and watched her cross the street, her slender hips moving beneath the black silk dress. "Maybe you should check out the boyfriend tonight, then cover her house in the morning."

It was a perfect summer's day the following morning when Mike camped out to watch Amy Jordan's house while she was at work. Since I had no other client at the moment, I turned on the answering machine and went out to see how he was doing. There were times when Darlan & Trapper was able to afford a secretary, but this wasn't one of them.

Our client's house faced Cedar Park with its playground, pond, and picnic tables, making it easy for Mike to blend in with the regular flow of morning park people. He'd worn his sweats and looked as if he was relaxing after a daily run. I made a show of encountering him accidentally, shook hands, and joined him on a bench. "Anything yet?"

"Not a thing," he said with a grin, as if I'd just made some witty remark. "All I've seen so far is the mailman."

I took out a cigarette, although I'd stopped smoking long ago. It gave me something to do with my hands. "How'd you do with the boyfriend last night?"

He shrugged. "Name's Rich Bombalay, like she said. He's got an apartment on the East Side. I followed him to a neighborhood bar and managed to strike up a conversation. Seems like a nice enough guy. Dark complexion, mid thirties, could be Indian. Says he's a day-trader. You know, stocks on the computer?"

"Now there's a profession to be in! About as solid as being a private dick."

"It's a new world, Al," Mike advised me with a gentle voice.

"You know something? This whole thing is starting to smell funny. You think this could be some sort of publicity stunt for her book?"

"How do you mean?"

"She could say her ideas are so good that other writers try to steal them from her."

He wasn't buying that. "I think she's telling the truth, Al. She seems like a nice enough person."

"Did this Bombalay mention our client?"

Mike grinned. "I asked him if there was a good place to meet women. He laughed and said he met one at a bookstore. She was a local author signing her novel. He told me she had a good-looking sister if I wanted to be fixed up, but it was just conversation. I had

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the impression the thing with our client isn't anything too serious on his part."

"Maybe I should check out the sister."

"Let's see if anyone shows up today." He patted the pocket where he carried his little flip-open cell phone. "I'll call you if anything happens."

I agreed to that and covered while he took a break in the park restroom. When I saw him heading back, I departed with a wave. Back at the office there were no calls, and after a while I went out to lunch at the coffee shop in our building. When I got back there was a message to call Mike on his cell phone.

"What's happening?" I asked when he answered.

"I tried to get you. A woman went in. I couldn't tell if she had a key or not. It might have been the sister, I don't know."

"She still there?"

"No, but I got her picture. I didn't want to grab her until I talked to you."

I agreed. "We were just hired to find out who was doing it. Get the picture developed and we'll show it to our client tomorrow."

Mike phoned Amy Jordan at home shortly after nine o'clock. By ten we were at her house, ringing the bell. While we waited, Mike stooped down to examine the lock. "Scratches," he noted. "Automatic lock pick."

He knew a lot more about automatic lock picks than I did. At that moment our client opened the door and we followed her inside. "Let me see the picture," she said grimly, without preamble.

"Here it is, from early yesterday afternoon." Mike slipped it out of the envelope and handed it to her. His zoom lens had caught the intruder just opening the front door. It showed an attractive woman a bit older and heavier than Amy but with a certain facial resemblance. In her right hand she held something about the size of an electric screwdriver.

Amy Jordan stared at the photo, her face frozen. "That's my sister Kate."

"She didn't need a key," Mike pointed out. "That gadget in her hand is an automatic lock pick."

"My God, you make her sound like a thief!"

"Thieves are the ones who use those things. Thieves and locksmiths. Is your sister a locksmith?"

"No." Her voice was little more than a whisper. "But she's not a thief, either. She'd have no reason to steal my ideas."

"She sees you making money from your books. Maybe she wants to make some, too."

She shook her head vigorously. "No. She knows she could come

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to me if she needed money. Besides, she's never shown the least interest in writing. She's a bookkeeper."

"Married?"

"Divorced. She had bad luck with a guy and it messed her up. She's doing okay now, though."

"I can see that in the picture," I told her, making no effort to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. "She handles the lock pick like a professional."

"I'm . . . I'm sure there's some explanation for this. I'll speak to her."

"Is there anything more we can do?" Mike asked. "The advance covered two days."

She considered that for a moment. "Could one of you come with me to her apartment? She works on a computer from home. I'm sure we'll find her there, but the neighborhood isn't the best."

"I'll come along," I told her before Mike could respond.

We parted outside the house and I rode in her car. She was silent during much of the journey, until we passed a block of empty stores near the river. Then she broke her silence. "Here's where it begins to get bad."

"What's she doing in this neighborhood?"

"Kate had a drug problem. She's better now, and she just found a job."

"Better doesn't mean cured."

"No, it doesn't. I try to look after her. I have a key to her place."

Amy Jordan parked in front of a cluster of garden apartments that seemed relatively new to the neighborhood. It wasn't until we approached the front door that I became aware of the graffiti. A young tough in a leather jacket came downstairs and pushed past us as we entered. Amy went to her sister's ground-floor apartment and pressed the bell.

"Maybe she's at work," I suggested after the second ring went unanswered.

"Her car's in the parking area. Under the circumstances, I hate to use my key."

When she didn't answer the third ring, I held out my hand. "Give it here. I'll use it."

We entered the apartment and Amy called out, "Kate? It's me!" There was no answer, and nothing stirred in the sun-swept living room. The kitchen likewise was empty. Amy walked across the carpet and opened the bedroom door. "Kate? *Oh my God! Kate!*"

I was at her side in an instant, then ran to the woman half tumbled from the bed. There were fresh track marks on her arm. "Call nine-one-one!" I shouted. "I think it's an overdose."

We all knew she was dead, though the ambulance intern didn't

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want to pronounce her so. They loaded her into the back of their vehicle for the five-minute run to the nearest hospital, while the cops looked over the apartment. They found nothing suspicious, no drugs, no paraphernalia, though the marks on her arm spoke volumes. Within ten minutes they got word from the hospital that she was DOA.

"Did your sister have a drug problem, Miss Jordan?" the detective sergeant asked. His name was Glenwood and I knew him slightly from downtown.

"She'd been in detox twice, but she was pretty good lately," Amy said, beginning to recover from the shock of her sister's death. "She even had a new job with a dress shop downtown."

We followed Glenwood to the police station and I called the office to let Mike know what was going on. "I'd better come down," he said. "She's my client."

"Don't bother. We're wrapping things up. I'll fill you in when I get there."

I accompanied Amy to the squad room while Sergeant Glenwood took a more detailed statement. She didn't mention her sister's apparent theft of her story idea from the computer. There seemed no need for that now. He did get around to asking me what I'd been doing there, and I told him Amy had asked my help with her next caper novel. In a way, it was perfectly true.

Before we left, he received a preliminary autopsy report. Kate Jordan had died of a massive heroin overdose. When Glenwood told her the news, Amy sobbed and shook her head. "I should have helped her more. She was into cocaine, but I'd never known her to try heroin."

I said nothing until we'd returned to the car. Then I told her, "Your sister didn't try heroin on her own. She was murdered."

"What? How can you be sure?"

"They didn't find a needle. She didn't inject it with a nail file, that's for sure, and a dose like that would have hit her quickly. Someone gave it to her, probably the same someone who got her to break into your house."

"What are you talking about?"

"The cops found nothing unusual, no drug stuff and apparently no automatic lock pick. That wasn't something your sister would have owned anyway. Someone gave it to her and showed her how to use it. You told us how much you research these novels of yours. I don't think the people who killed Kate want to steal your idea in order to write a book. They want to use it for a real-life caper of their own."

Her eyes seemed to widen at the thought. "They could use any of my novels for that! The crimes are all based upon actual circumstances. My Charleston book has a hotel robbery—"

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"But once the books are published, security measures at your target locations would naturally be tightened. A thief would want to know what your next book would be about."

"Well, it's about Saratoga in the racing season. That much is no secret."

"You're going to rob the track," I guessed.

"Not exactly."

"Let's go back to your house. I need to read those notes and your draft on the computer. I need to see just what it was your sister apparently stole."

As we pulled in her driveway we saw a light blue sedan already there. A man was ringing her doorbell and I assumed it was another detective working on the case. But Amy took one look at him and groaned. "It's Josh Carmody, Kate's ex-husband. I should have known he'd turn up."

He turned from the door as we approached, a slender middle-aged man in a rumpled blue suit that seemed too heavy for the weather. "Amy! Thank God you're here! Have you heard the awful news about Kate? It was on the news."

Amy Jordan nodded. "We just came from police headquarters." Seeing his questioning eyes on me, she added, "This is Al Darlan, a private detective I've hired."

He looked at Amy and then shifted his gaze back to me. "Detective? Didn't she die from an overdose?"

"Well, yes. But we don't know how she got it." Amy obviously had no intention of clarifying the reason I'd been hired.

"Are you making the funeral arrangements?" he asked.

"Of course. She was my sister. There are no other relatives."

"I wondered if I might help. I was still very close to Kate, you know. We were even talking about getting back together."

"No, I didn't know that."

She unlocked the door and the three of us went in. "Help yourself to a beer," she told him. "It's in the fridge." While he went out to the kitchen she quickly rebooted the computer and pointed me toward her document file. The two of them sat at the kitchen table discussing Kate Jordan's funeral while I brought up the notes and outline for *The Saratoga Steal* on the screen. That much I could do without any help.

"Racing every day but Tuesday," her notes began, "for six weeks prior to Labor Day. Thoroughbred track is on Union Avenue. On racing days, at exactly 11:30 in the morning, a police car with lights flashing pulls into the intersection of Broadway and Church, blocking traffic in all directions. An armored car from the New York Racing Association pulls out of the drive-up teller lane of the Adirondack Trust Bank followed by a second police car. The

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vehicle in the intersection leads the way, with the other two following. The track's money for the day is in the armored car, and the three vehicles continue down Route 29 (Church Street now becomes Lake Avenue) to Circular Street, then right four blocks and left on Union Avenue to the track."

There was much more, about Saratoga Springs, Yaddo, and the racetrack, but even in the opening chapters she gave no clue as to how she'd bring off the robbery of the Racing Association's armored car. I waited patiently until they finished their conversation about Kate's funeral arrangements and Josh Carmody went on his way. "He seems like a decent chap," I told her.

"Not according to Kate, but that's a whole other story."

"Was he into drugs, too?"

"A little pot, I guess, but my sister tried coke on her own. That was when he left her. She always thought he could have been more supportive."

"You told me Kate visited your house after your return from Saratoga."

"She dropped in one afternoon. I told her I'd gotten a start on the new novel and hoped to get back up to Yaddo for another week or so before my month ran out."

"Did you tell her the plot?"

Amy shook her head. "I never discuss my plots in advance, not even with Kate. She knew it would be set in Saratoga, but that was all. You read what was on the computer. After the break-in I did remove a later page."

I nodded. "The part about their escape? I only know that the Racing Association armored car is going to be robbed after it leaves the bank. And even that raises a question."

"What?"

"Why rob it on the way to the track, when it would probably be carrying more money that evening on its way back from the track?"

Amy Jordan smiled slightly and refused to answer.

On Thursday morning it was decided that Mike would remain in the city with our client until after Friday's funeral. Meanwhile I would drive to Saratoga Springs, about three hours away, and see what I could find out. "There's less than two weeks left to the racing season," I told Mike, "and if someone's going to try this robbery it could be any day now. If we catch the robbers we'll have Kate Jordan's killer."

"I wasn't hired to find Kate Jordan's killer," he reminded me. "I was hired to find out who was getting into her house, and we did that."

"Look, it's obvious someone put Amy's sister up to this, and

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showed her how to use that automatic lock pick. Probably that person was supplying her with drugs. If we can find him, it'll wrap up the whole case, the break-ins and the killing both."

Mike sighed, deciding he couldn't talk me out of it. "If you go, take your gun. And don't do anything foolish."

It was early afternoon when I arrived in Saratoga, too late to watch the armored car leave the bank and head for the track that day. I found a big old hotel on Broadway that dated from 1877, took a room for a couple of nights, and then drove out to the track on Union Avenue. The town was crowded and the track itself was mobbed. Hundreds of race-goers sat at picnic tables outside the grandstand, betting at nearby windows and watching the races on television monitors attached to trees. I wandered through the crowd, getting the feel of the place. After losing a bet on the fifth race I left the track, retrieved my car from a parking lot down the street, and drove farther out on Union Avenue.

Before long I came to a road to the right that read: *Yaddo Gardens: Open to the Public 8 A.M. to Dusk.* I turned down the road, parked my car in the woods with a few others, and set off the rest of the way on foot. There was a large grassy area with an elaborate fountain to my left, and up the hill to my right, an imposing but somewhat forbidding mansion that dated from the late eighteen hundreds. A sign about halfway up the lawn warned against trespassing beyond that point. I walked on, straight ahead, and found the rose garden and the rock garden, separated by pine trees and a long trellised rose arbor that I later learned was called a pergola. There were more statues and another fountain, and beyond a battered wire fence I caught a glimpse of one of the little studios where the writers and artists worked. Once I thought I heard the crowd from the track, but I couldn't be sure.

Presently I went back the way I had come, nodding pleasantly to an elderly couple who were inspecting the roses. I drove back into town and walked along Broadway, stopping across the street from the bank building. There was a post office on the corner to the north, and the town hall diagonally across. I stood in front of some shops on the fourth corner. Satisfied, I returned to my hotel for an early dinner.

Later, I got the cell phone out of the car so I wouldn't forget to have it with me the following day. Then I cleaned and oiled my old .38 revolver, which hadn't been fired in over a year. I slept well, and in the morning I checked the weather page of the newspaper to see what time sundown was that day. About ten minutes to eight.

I had a good feeling about the day. I'd finally figured out why Amy Jordan's book had the armored car robbed before the day's races rather than after. It was because the escape route had to be

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in the track area rather than on the way back to the bank. And that told me the robbery was going to be this day.

I was sitting on a bench across the street when the lead police car halted traffic at exactly 11:30 and then led the usual parade out, just as Amy's notes had described it. A few people stopped to stare, but for most it was a familiar sight that passed almost unnoticed.

I went down the street to a bar called Professor Moriarty's and had a sandwich and beer for lunch. Around one o'clock I drove out to the track to find exactly the uproar I'd expected.

"What's the trouble?" I asked a bystander.

"They've had to cancel the racing card for today. There was some sort of robbery."

I found local news on my car radio and listened to the report. ". . . two officers were overpowered on their way to the bank by a pair of robbers in police uniforms. They were left bound and gagged in a van on Railroad Alley while the robbers took their police car and proceeded to the bank. On their way to the track the robbers phoned the armored car and the other police car to tell them a change of plans had been ordered. After arriving at the track they drove past the grandstand to the woods at the eastern end of the property. The other two officers were quickly overpowered and threatened with death if the guards in the armored car didn't open their door. All four men were handcuffed and locked in the armored car while the robbers escaped on foot into the woods with four bags of currency. Bags of coins were not taken, and the New York Racing Association refuses to say how much money is missing. The day's racing has been canceled, and at this hour police continue to search the area for the armed robbers. It's believed a confederate may have been waiting with a getaway car on Union Avenue near the Route 87 exit."

I drove back to the parking area at Yaddo Gardens. There were three other cars there, plus a van with Vermont license plates and a police car with its lights flashing. Ahead, on the lawn leading to the rose garden, I could see two officers questioning visitors. As I approached, one of the officers stopped me. "We're searching for two robbers wearing police uniforms. Have you seen anyone suspicious?"

"I just arrived," I told him. I was wearing a sport shirt and slacks, and I'd left my gun in the glove compartment. Ahead, I saw a uniformed officer and a man in a jacket come out of the woods on the far side of the rose garden. They talked to the other cops for a few minutes and then the plainclothes cop and one officer started up the hill to the mansion. I was sure they wouldn't be receiving a warm reception there.

I crossed the rose garden, where a young man was taking pho-

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tographs, stopping to chat with two women about the beauty of the place, and then walked along the fence on the far side to the spot where I could see one of the studios. There was no sunburst on its door. I decided I really couldn't pursue this further without a weapon, so I headed back to my car. A gray-haired woman from the mansion had come down the hill with the officers and was standing with them in the parking area. "I really couldn't tell you about the cars," she was saying. "Our guests' private lives are their own. We discourage visitors, but we don't ban them. Some have been known to park back here. I've called all the studios equipped with telephones and no one has seen any strangers in the woods except for you policemen doing your searching."

"The robbers were wearing police uniforms," the detective told her.

I got in my car and backed out, missing the rest of the conversation. It seemed wise to stay away until the police had left the scene. Chances were the armored-car bandits wouldn't be appearing anytime soon, but just to be sure I parked down the street where I had a view of the road to the gardens. A car with the two women in it left soon afterward and the police car departed about a half-hour later. I waited until nearly four, watching a couple of crows peck at roadkill, and finally drove back down the garden road. Two cars and the van were still there. I walked in across the lawn to the rose garden. This time I had the gun in my right-hand pants pocket. The young man with the camera was taking pictures of the rose-covered pergola even though the blossoms were obviously past their peak. I kept my distance, waiting to see what would happen next. Finally the young man went around the back of the pergola to the rock garden, where a single spout of water rose high into the air. Once he was out of sight I dropped on my knees behind a hedge, transferring the pistol to the back of my waistband.

After about ten minutes, the photographer reappeared, glancing around, and spoke into his cell phone. Another five minutes and two men appeared in shirtsleeves, carrying four brown paper bags that seemed to be full. I pushed 9-1-1 on my own cell phone and said a few quick words. The men had joined the younger man, who relieved them of two of the bags.

That was when I stood up and drew my gun. "Rich Bombalay!" I called out.

The darkest of the men dropped the bag and went for his gun. I held my breath and shot him in the leg. He toppled into a bush of dying roses, with banded packages of money spilling from his bag. The other two froze where they were.

"Do I have to explain it all?" I asked Amy Jordan and Mike the following morning, back in the Darlan & Trapper office.

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"You certainly do," Amy insisted. "You're telling me that this man I went out with a few times killed my sister and robbed the Racing Association's armored van in Saratoga, then hid from the police in my studio at Yaddo until you shot him as he was trying to escape with the money?"

"Obviously he sought you out at the book signing because he knew your sister. I believe he'd been supplying her with drugs for some time. He must have heard about your talent for creating these caper novels based on real situations in actual cities, and decided he and a couple of friends could pull off a real-life caper of their own. He visited you at Yaddo and that gave him a general idea of the layout. I'm sure you mentioned that you had the studio for the month and would be returning there. He forced Kate to break into your house while you were away and copy your notes off the computer, returning for more as you worked on the early chapters. That must have been enough to set his plan in motion. He'd rob the armored car at a remote part of the track, then escape with the loot. Yaddo was right next door, through the woods and over a fence. Bombalay and his accomplice knew your studio would be empty, and I'm sure you'd told him about the sunburst on the door. It was easy enough to find. The person behind all this had to be Bombalay. You said Kate had never met him, yet he told Mike you had a good-looking sister."

"Why did he bring Kate into it?"

"Because you wouldn't discuss your plot with him or anyone else. He had to know the exact mechanics of the plan. Kate got as much as she could for him. Maybe she left the lid of your laptop open deliberately to try and warn you."

"I'd like to think so," she said quietly. "Why did he kill her? Just to keep her quiet?"

"I'm sure that was his main reason. But there was another one, too. The robbery had to occur on a day when you weren't up at your Yaddo studio. He knew you were planning to return for the rest of the month, but there was one day he could be sure you'd be here in the city. The day of your sister's funeral."

She gave a little gasp. "Then you knew it would be yesterday."

"Yes. It was the only completely safe day for him. Or so he thought."

She shook her head. "What a cold-blooded bastard! And to think that I actually liked him!"

It was Mike, silent until then, who asked the final question. "How did Bombalay get into her studio? Amy doesn't have a key. It's kept at the mansion."

"He didn't need a key, remember? He had an automatic lock pick." ●

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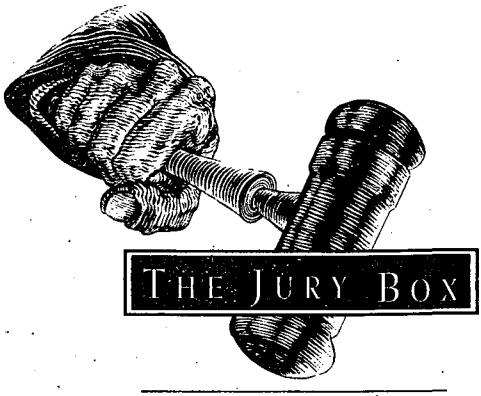

by Jon L. Breen

In a time of overlong books (for examples, see the second through fourth novels reviewed below), a minimalist like Ken Bruen offers a refreshing change of pace. He can cram an amazing number of well-realized characters and a remarkably involved plot into less than 150 pages, and the third volume in his White Trilogy about London cops Roberts and Brant is the strongest of the lot. Be warned, though, that Bruen is not for everybody.

**** Ken Bruen: *The McDead,* Do-Not/Dufour, $29.95 hardcover, $15.95 paper. This very dark and violent tragicomedy is less overtly satirical than the first two and maybe closer to a standard police procedural—but that's still not very close. Litmus test for new readers: check out the chapter on pages 18 and 19 about the funeral of Roberts's brother, with special attention to loose cannon Brant's exchange with the vicar. If you don't think it's funny, Bruen isn't for you.

*** John Dunning: *Two O'Clock Eastern Wartime,* Scribner, $26. While this leisurely story of radio broadcasting in the early days of World War II wouldn't work in 150 pages, it would be better at half to two-thirds its 473-page length. Still, readers as fascinated as I am by the background won't carp too much. Dunning, author of the definitive 1998 reference book *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (Oxford University Press), gives the most detailed and authoritative account of early radio in any mystery I've read since *Death at Broadcasting House* (1934; American title, *London Calling*), that Golden Age treasure by Val Gielgud and Holt Marvell. In his novel *Looking for Ginger North* (1980), Dunning did an equally admirable job on horse racing, a background that exists at the fringes of the present book.

*** Jan Burke: *Flight,* Simon & Schuster, $24. When Philip Lefebrve, dogged loner detec-

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tive of the Las Piernas, California, police, vanishes in his private plane, he is assumed by colleagues to have murdered a teenage boy he had befriended, the witness and survivor of the grisly slaying of the boy's police commissioner father and sister. Ten years later, Lefebrve's plane and remains are found, and LPPD detective Frank Harriman is assigned to the case—his wife Irene Kelly, reporter-detective of seven previous novels, in a supporting role this time. The romantic misunderstandings between the pair grow somewhat tiresome, but Burke works expertly on a broad canvas, providing two larger-than-life villains (one known and one unknown) that seem made for the big screen. This is good, though not in the class of her recently-reprinted 1999 Edgar-winner, the dazzling and complex *Bones* (Signet, $6.99).

*** Anne Perry: *The Whitechapel Conspiracy,* Ballantine, $25. Some of the earlier novels about Charlotte and Thomas Pitt made passing reference to the major London case of their late-19th-century time: Jack the Ripper. Now they take it on directly. Perry's theory about Jack is familiar from Stephen Knight's *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution* and from the film *Murder by Decree,* but the way it is combined with a fictional murder and the machinations of the sinister Inner Circle is cleverly managed, and Perry draws much humor from the growing relationship between the Pitts' plucky housemaid Gracie and Thomas Pitt's prickly partner Tellman.

*** Anne Perry: *A Dish Taken Cold,* Carroll & Graf/Penzler, $11.95. Here's Perry at a shorter length (a 73-page novella) and in a different historical setting: Paris in 1792. In the terrifying political climate of the French Revolution, Celie, a young servant, considers revenge on those she believes responsible for the death of her infant child. In a story that is more moral fable than detective tale, the background comes to life and the climax (though predictable) is satisfactory.

*** William F. Nolan: *Down the Long Night,* introduction by Ed Gorman, Five Star, $21.95. One of the most versatile and reliable of popular fiction pros presents a dozen stories, ranging in date from 1957 (the title tale, a spirited fun-house *grand guignol* written with Charles Beaumont) to 2000 ("Once Upon a Time," an offbeat not-for-kids take on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs).* Others, mostly from the last decade, include robots Holmes and Watson collaborating with Mars-based private eye Sam Space on a new manifestation of the Baskerville curse; a story of superhero origins which was *not* published as a Batman-and-Robin story (you'll see why); and some exceedingly dark but effective pure crime stories. Nolan's story notes add to the reader's enjoyment.

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*** Ross Macdonald: *Strangers in Town: Three Newly Discovered Stories*, edited by Tom Nolan, Crippen & Landru, $15 trade paper, $37 limited hardcover. These three private-eye tales were held back from publication during the author's lifetime for reasons unrelated to their quality, which is up to the standard of Macdonald's other short stories. "Death by Water," written in 1945, was deemed too similar in murder method to the other story about Joe Rogers, the *EQMM* prize winner "Find the Woman" (published as by Kenneth Millar but subsequently reprinted under the Macdonald name with Rogers renamed Lew Archer). The title story and "The Angry Man" provided the framework for Archer novels, *The Ivory Grin* (1952) and *The Doomsters* (1958) respectively, but stand up well on their own. By his own account, Macdonald was less impressive at short-story than at novel length, but these stories deserve publication, and the information in Macdonald biographer Nolan's 36-page introduction and story notes will be indispensable to scholars and interesting to other readers.

Well-deserved honors have been flowing to Edward D. Hoch—the Mystery Writers of America's Grand Master Edgar Award and the Bouchercon's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2001, following last year's career honor from the Private Eye Writers of America. The 148-page loose-leaf *Edward D. Hoch Bibliography* is now in its tenth edition, covering 1955 through 2000. Compiled by June M. Moffatt and Francis M. Nevins, Jr., with an introduction by Marvin Lachman, it provides a full listing of all Hoch's series and non-series stories, books, nonfiction articles, and film adaptations. Current statistics: over 900 stories; 26 series; longest running is Simon Ark (54 stories, 1955-1999 with more, surely, to come); largest number of stories is Captain Leopold (102 stories, 1957-2000); most anthologized story is the science-fiction story "Zoo" (*Fantastic Universe,* June 1958) with 36 anthology appearances, if I counted right, many of them in classroom texts. Other valuable fetures are Lachman's chronologies of Hoch's two historical series, those featuring Dr. Sam Hawthorne and Ben Snow. The Hoch bibliography, a bargain at $10 plus postage and handling ($4 U.S., $10 foreign), may be ordered from June M. Moffatt, Box 4456, Downey, CA 90241-1456.

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Art by Mark Evans

WHISTLE

by David Dean

It was Silkie's low, warning growl that brought her to full consciousness, though the ragged, frantic barking up and down the street had percolated through her dreams sometime before. Miriam lay in the warm darkness of her bed, eyes open but still unseeing, as the remnants of the dream she had been having gradually released her.

She had dreamed of her husband, though not as she had last seen him in life, but as he had been during their courting over forty years before: full of health and vigor, handsome and boyish. He had approached her with a sprightly step, smiling and whistling at the same time, and she had smiled happily back, trying to recognize the tune, only to realize that there was no tune at all. He strode by her without acknowledgment, his head swinging from right to left, his low whistle rising and falling melodically in a sad, yearning call; while somewhere outside her dreams she felt Silkie grow restless on the bed.

With a huff of breath, she shook her head to scatter the last clinging tendrils of sleep and turned her attention to her closest,

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and only, companion. Silkie stood on her stumpy hind legs, stretched her full long length to rest her front paws on the window sill. By the faint glow of a distant street lamp, Miriam could see that her dog's whole bearing was one of anxious inquiry, her slender head whipping to and fro, from the window to Miriam and back again, her tail curled tightly and scything the air in anxiety. (When questioned about the presence of a tail on a corgi, Miriam had always pointed out that her corgi was a Cardigan, not one of your common Pembrokeshires with their poor little stubs. She knew it was ridiculous to be proud of a dog for being what it was, but couldn't help herself.)

Police lieutenant David Dean has been writing for *EQMM* for just over ten years, averaging about one story per year. The quality of his fiction is such that we would expect to publish him more often were his job less demanding of his time. Though many of his early tales for *EQMM* involved a fictional police force, recently he's been producing a wider range of stories, including this one about an old woman and her dog.

The dog now thrust its snout betwixt the partially raised window and the sill, squeezing its delicate skull in as far as it could go before reaching the screen, alternately growling and blowing her nostrils clear to better draft the scent so troubling her. All the while, the larger dogs up and down Miriam's winding street barked themselves hoarse from their backyard pens. She knew that Silkie was dying to join in their chorus, but held back for fear of her mistress's disapproval. Even so, she cast occasional pleading glances in Miriam's direction while dancing nervously from one paw to the next.

Miriam sat up in bed. "This is too much," she muttered. "It's getting to be a regular occasion around here!"

She heaved her small, rather corpulent frame from the warm confines of her bed and made her way to the window, glancing at her bedside clock as she did. It read two twenty-seven A.M. With a slight grunt, she bent at the waist, shouldering Silkie aside for a view of what could be causing all the commotion. Undaunted, the corgi shoved back and managed to wedge herself into a somewhat tighter accommodation at the window.

Miriam peered hard into the shadowed darkness of the yard and the street beyond, but was unable to discern anything out of the ordinary. Even with the full moon casting its soft, strong illumination, Miriam could see nothing to be alarmed about. She looked down at the corgi, who gazed up at her as if awaiting further instructions, her dark eyes and black nose glistening in the moonlight.

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With an explosive bark that made Miriam's heart jump, Silkie's attention swiveled back to the window and the world outside it. The dog began a frantic effort to climb up into the window itself.

"Shush!" Miriam cried out, then clamped a hand over her own mouth. Had she seen something move out there? Something, or someone, skirting the sharp edges of the shadows that lay like spilled ink across the street in the Neufields' yard? Certainly Silkie had sensed something! Had someone been watching her the whole time she had been squinting out the window?

Instinctively, she drew back, tugging her reluctant pet with her. The barking of the Tobers' dogs just next door grew in intensity. Wasn't that in the same direction that the shadow had been moving? Silkie strained at her collar, growling deep in her throat, the fur on her shoulders and tail standing on end. After several minutes, the barking of the Tobers' dogs began to taper off and Silkie visibly relaxed. Miriam remembered to breathe and exhaled loudly into the quiet room.

With a bound, Silkie leapt up onto the bed, circled several times, and then flopped herself down with a loud sigh. Flattening her huge, pointed ears back against her skull, she squeezed her eyes shut and composed herself for slumber, her previous concerns forgotten.

"Must be nice!" Miriam chided the small creature lovingly, and proceeded to burrow back into her covers, but not without a nervous glance at the window.

As the barking faded in her own neighborhood to be picked up distantly in others, Miriam closed her eyes for a second time that night, thinking harsh thoughts of careless dog owners who let their animals roam or, worse, simply turned them out when they grew tired of them or found them suddenly unfashionable. It had not escaped her notice that the young families of her neighborhood only chose breeds that were in vogue. The current fad favored Labradors on the one hand, of which there were no fewer than five on her block alone, and more ferocious-looking types on the other, such as pit bulls. She'd heard rumors of only one such creature on her street, and had not laid eyes on it, no one had, as its master, a part-time dog breeder, kept it locked away in a secure pen behind his house. In any case, she strongly suspected that one of these unworthy owners was responsible for the near-nightly cacophony that had plagued the neighborhood these two weeks past. With the passing of years she found sleep difficult enough without the unwanted canine serenade, and if it continued, she fully intended to investigate.

The following morning was fine and brisk and Miriam arose at her usual early hour, if somewhat crankily due to last night's interrup-

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tions, in order to feed and walk Silkie. As was their custom, the woman and dog strolled to the end of their street, which terminated in a cul-de-sac. Beyond lay a small wood that separated Miriam's neighborhood from another a quarter-mile to the south. The wood line provided a convenient place for Silkie to "conduct her business" without annoying any neighbors or forcing Miriam to use the awkward and embarrassing "scooper."

It was on their return that Miriam spied her neighbor from across the street, Elizabeth, posting her mail. Miriam hurried to catch her before she returned indoors.

"'Lizbeth, oh, 'Lizbeth . . . good morning!" Miriam saluted, while Silkie strained at her leash in order to be the first to greet their neighbor. Miriam reined her in with an effort, not wishing to have the dog jump up on Elizabeth. Silkie, unlike Elizabeth's dog, was not in the least obedient to commands, and Miriam had never had the heart to properly discipline her small companion.

Elizabeth appeared genuinely glad to see them, though her smile was a bit tremulous. She even took a moment to squat down and rub Silkie's belly, as the corgi had flopped over onto its back in total submission upon reaching her feet.

The younger woman's actions secretly pleased Miriam, as she tended to judge others somewhat by their conduct with her dog, though she knew this to be unfair.

"How are you, Miriam?" Elizabeth inquired, standing once more and folding her arms across her chest against the autumnal chill.

"Well, a little worn around the edges, I'm afraid. All that commotion again last night. Were you and Gary bothered?" Miriam asked, noticing dark smudges beneath Elizabeth's eyes.

Elizabeth looked down at her elderly neighbor with concern. "It woke us up, but we got back to sleep pretty quickly. Gary thinks it's the deer setting the dogs off. This time of year they tend to raid the flower beds and shrubs as food gets scarce in the woods."

Miriam had not considered this possibility before. Had her husband still been alive, he would surely have thought of it. "Oh," Miriam responded thoughtfully. "Did Gary go out to see last night, by any chance?"

"Oh, no." Elizabeth laughed aloud at the suggestion. "You know Gary. When he's in, there's no moving him. I had to pull him by the arm to get him to leave the house that time our chimney caught fire! He would not go out in the middle of the night . . . period," she finished convincingly. "Why?" she asked, catching up to Miriam's question and becoming slightly alarmed. "Did you see someone around our house last night?"

Miriam suddenly felt foolish, and, worse, guilty of causing her young friend uneasiness. Had she really seen anything last night other than a movement in the shadows . . . maybe? In any case,

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Gary was probably right that it was a deer. "No . . . I guess it was the whistling that made me think that."

"Whistling?" Elizabeth looked concerned in a different way now.

"You didn't hear it?" Miriam asked shyly, noting the look on her neighbor's face and blushing with the realization that she was mixing up her dreams with reality.

Elizabeth paused, as if she were seriously trying to recall the previous night. "No, but, honey, we do sleep with the windows closed this time of year."

"Maybe I should, too," Miriam offered weakly.

"It'll help with the dogs," Elizabeth assured her.

A thought suddenly occurred to Miriam. "Where's Dakota, 'Lizbeth? I haven't seen her in days." It was their mutual distinction as the only two lap-dog owners on the street that had originally brought the women together despite their difference in years. They always inquired into the health and well-being of their respective pets and enjoyed many a curbside conversation recounting their little companions' antics and eccentricities. Neither had been favored with children.

Elizabeth's face crumpled, large tears welling up in her eyes and threatening to spill over.

" 'Lizbeth," Miriam cried out in shock at her friend's distress, instinctively reaching out for her. "What's the matter? What's wrong, sweetie?"

Elizabeth had clapped both hands over her mouth as if to contain a torrent of emotion. "My puppy's got lost," she choked through her fingers. "Or run away . . . I don't know!"

"No, no . . . she would never run away," Miriam assured her neighbor, as sympathetic tears welled up in her own eyes. She glanced furtively at Silkie, who sat studying the two women in bewilderment, and was ashamed at her own sense of relief that it was Elizabeth who had suffered the loss and not she, though her sympathy was all the more real for it. "No, she must have got lost, honey. . . . She'll find her way back," Miriam concluded, giving Elizabeth a reassuring pat on the arm.

"I hope so . . . I truly do . . . but it's been almost two weeks now. We just let her out one night to pee, like we always did . . ." She trailed off, her lips trembling. After a moment of silence, she reached out and squeezed Miriam's hand. "I'd best get in now."

Miriam watched her neighbor until she disappeared within her home, and then turned heavily towards her own. "That dog would never run away," she stated firmly to Silkie, whose fruit-bat ears pricked up at the tone of his mistress. "And she didn't get lost, either. Dakota's not like you . . . she behaves!"

Silkie, however, had lost interest and was busy investigating a spot of grass that had captured her attention. Straining her

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stocky, muscular frame against the pull of the leash, she was able to continue her delicate and infuriatingly thorough scenting. Miriam was forced to apply both hands in order to drag the dog away, and not for the first time questioned her own wisdom in not enrolling Silkie in obedience training.

Again it was the barking that awoke her, rolling from south to north, rising in intensity as it was taken up by the dogs in her own neighborhood, while falling off in more distant ones. This time, however, it did not disturb or color her dreams, but brought her to an instant, clearheaded wakefulness. She glanced over to the window and saw that Silkie was already manning her post: head thrust forward and nose pressed to the screen, earnestly testing for the presence of whatever lay without, a deep, hesitant growl bubbling in her throat.

Miriam did not even bother to check the time, as she knew it was quite late. She had been unable to get to sleep until well after midnight, and even then it had taken several chapters of a particularly bad novel to do the trick. The news of Dakota's disappearance, as well as her dream of the previous night, had left her restless and not a little apprehensive. She longed for the decisive, no-nonsense company of her husband, who would've marched into the darkness to confront or even do battle with whatever waited there. He had been a highly decorated marine in the Korean War, she reflected proudly.

Somewhat emboldened by his memory, she made to rise and approach the window; the whistle froze her in mid step. Silkie's growl grew louder and more angry, and a bark was not far away. The thought of this, of Silkie bringing attention to her darkened window, flooded Miriam with a sudden terror. The idea that out there, on the moonlit street, a head would turn and a face washed white by cold luminescence would lift its gaze to her window was more than she could bear. She rushed to the dog and snatched it up as it wriggled and struggled in protest. Hugging the corgi close, she tried to shush and comfort the surprised animal, to no avail.

It wasn't just a dream, Miriam thought with little cheer. *I was right. Someone's whistling for a dog.*

The whistling stopped and the neighborhood dogs' barking grew less frenzied but did not cease. Several minutes passed and Silkie's struggles weakened, though her attention never wavered from whatever was transpiring beyond Miriam's walls. Outside, the barking ceased to be a communal effort and fell to individual voices—one dog answering another in challenging conversation. Silkie grew quiet in Miriam's lap and accepted the strokes and murmured affirmations of "good girl" with evident pleasure. The

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neighborhood, at last, became silent. Miriam's grip on her precious corgi loosened.

The whistle, though low and furtive, might have been an air-raid siren at a funeral for the great howl of protest it elicited. The dogs voiced their intolerance at being called to where they could not follow, and threw themselves against their chain-link pens in anguish.

Instantly, Silkie leaped from Miriam's arms and onto the floor. In a blur of speed, she made not for the bedroom window but for the stairs and the freedom of the unguarded first floor. Miriam was up like a shot as well, guessing the small dog's intent and determined to thwart it if humanly possible.

What Miriam referred to as Silkie's "perch" was only an ordinary window in the dining room that faced the street. Its attraction to the dog lay in the design, which placed the sill a mere foot off the floor. This arrangement allowed the short-legged creature to clamber in, where she just fit, to enjoy a view of the outside world in relative comfort—much like a large house cat. The aluminum screen prevented her from sliding out and falling the short distance to the earth, though its retentive powers had grown rather strained over the years by her thirty pounds.

It was to this window that dog and woman raced through the darkened house. As she hurried down the stairs, gripping the bannister in the darkness, she could hear the dog's unclipped nails clattering across the hardwood floors at high speed. "Stay!" Miriam cried out hopelessly. But Silkie, long on affection and amusing antics, was short on discipline, and hurtled, heedless of her mistress's admonition, into the window at breakneck speed. Predictably, her momentum accomplished exactly what Miriam had feared, and with a small yelp of surprise Silkie and the frayed screen vanished into the night. The whistle, just as suddenly, ceased.

Forgetting her previous terror of the whistler, Miriam gained the first floor and made for the front of the house as quickly as her plump legs would take her. She threw open the door and rushed into the yard crying, "Silkie! Silkie!"

If the neighbors' dogs had been in a frenzy before, they now were beside themselves and redoubled their efforts; some even began to howl a dismal counterpoint to Miriam's pitiful cries. Somewhere down the street a roused neighbor yelled, "Shut up!" None of this penetrated Miriam's frantic concern over Silkie's whereabouts, and she continued to call and search the yard and shrubberies . . . but Silkie was nowhere to be seen.

With a small, muffled sob, Miriam wandered onto the twisting, tree-lined street and looked both north and south. Where the trees did not obscure the newly waning moon, the blacktop appeared as oily and black as the scales of the rat snake that haunted her

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flower beds. In those patches where the reflected illumination could not reach, the darkness was as impenetrable as blindness. Silkie was neither to be seen nor heard.

Little by little, the neighborhood grew quiet again, leaving the old woman crying softly in the street until exhaustion and grief combined to rob her of her will to continue. With heavy steps she recrossed her moonlit yard to the waiting open door, all the while convinced that she was watched from the safety of the mocking darkness.

She fell asleep shortly before dawn in a hard dining-room chair overlooking Silkie's abandoned perch, tired and wretched, framed in the gaping hole of the screen that commemorated her little friend's inexplicable departure.

By mid-morning, only a little less tired and somewhat fragilely composed, Miriam embarked upon a door-to-door search for her corgi. Though she was not close to the families that inhabited her street, she felt certain that no one was unfamiliar with the sight of her and Silkie on their daily walks, and therefore they could be relied on to take the errant dog in and return her to her mistress at the first opportunity. It was simply a matter of alerting them to be on the lookout. She also carried a large shopping bag filled with Silkie's favorite "chewies," which she intended to distribute to each household to be used as enticements if the dog were spotted. After all, she reasoned, Silkie could hardly be expected to run to strangers just because they called.

The first thing Miriam discovered was that almost all of her young neighbors, both husband and wife, worked, and therefore no one was to be found at home. Nonetheless, fear for Silkie drove her ever forward to try each and every door.

On her fifth attempt, she met with limited success. Having pulled a rather harried young mother from her screaming toddler, Miriam set about to enlist the woman's aid, only to find herself crying as well, describing her dog and its predicament between barely suppressed sobs. With thinly disguised distaste at Miriam's performance, the young woman reluctantly accepted the baggie of dog treats and promised to keep an eye out for the missing dog. Miriam thanked her effusively and began to turn away, but not before the wailing brat snatched the bag of goodies from his mother's hand and dashed for the interior of the house. Before Miriam could protest, the door was closed in her face.

Stupid, mean-hearted girl, Miriam thought as she made her unsteady way down the drive. *Not even to invite me in . . . or offer a tissue!* She ranted inwardly as she rummaged through her purse for a handkerchief. A wadded one lay at the very bottom and she snatched it out to dab angrily at her running eyes, a hot resolve

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replacing her sense of humiliation and dependency on the kindness of neighbors.

Within minutes she discovered a man pushing some kind of contraption that spread a white powder across his meticulous lawn. Miriam recognized him as a teacher at the local high school and thought his name to be Ward. She had often noticed that he would be home on days when school was in session and suspected he abused his sick-time privileges. If he did, he did so without care, for he was always to be found manicuring and grooming his yard and flower beds for all to see.

Miriam strode across the carpet of lush green until she caught up to him and tapped him on the shoulder, visibly startling him. Simultaneously, his two Labrador retrievers, one black, the other white, came bounding around the corner of the house to confront the intruder they had scented from the backyard. They came at a silent lope and had almost reached her when Ward gave the shouted command, "Stay . . . sit!" Both animals came to an instant halt and sat down on their haunches, teeth bared for Miriam's benefit.

Miriam took an involuntary step backwards. "No." Ward spoke to her in a lower tone. "It's all right."

The dogs appeared as obedient as the environment that Ward had created of his property, and Miriam was a little reassured, though somewhat ashamed at the story she was there to relate of her own undisciplined dog and the trouble it had led to.

When she had sufficiently caught her breath again, and the beating of her heart had slowed enough to allow it, she explained what she wanted of him.

"That's that little dog I've seen you with, isn't it?" he inquired rather stupidly. "That's too bad . . . a damn shame. Though I don't think he'll be coming round here," Ward stated flatly, hooking a thumb in the direction of his Labs. "They wouldn't have it."

"She," Miriam corrected.

"How's that?" Ward looked perplexed. "Oh . . . your dog, right . . . she. In any case, I'll know if she shows up, that's for sure!" And he smiled proudly at his canine guardians as if he could already envision their running the corgi to ground and tearing it apart.

"Thank you," Miriam murmured and turned to go with no intention of sharing any of Silkie's treats with these brutes. A thought struck her and she turned back to find Ward smiling condescendingly at her. He quickly wiped the smile away.

"Did you hear anyone whistling last night when all that barking was going on?" Miriam asked.

Ward seemed to think it over carefully, as if somewhat embarrassed at his previous cavalier attitude. "I thought I did at one point. You know these two were puttin' up quite a racket at the time." A perplexed look crossed his face. "That wasn't you?"

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"No," Miriam assured him. "That started before my Silkie got out."

"Well, it sure seemed to come from your end of the street."

"Yes," she mused. "It sure did."

With this thought in mind, Miriam made her way determinedly in that direction, passing both Elizabeth's house and her own. She knew that Elizabeth worked during the day so didn't bother to stop, but made a mental note to add Elizabeth to her after-dinner rounds. Instead, she aimed herself towards the house just next to her fellow sufferer, an idea rapidly taking place in her brain that had been suggested by Ward's offhanded observation. An idea that, as she trundled along, took the form of a suspicion.

The house that she approached stood well back from the street, its rear seemingly nestled against the wood line, though this was deceptive. In fact, the owner had cleared a long, narrow strip into the woods while allowing the remaining forest to creep up to both sides of his home. The result was that from the front the cleared area was completely unseen, while the house itself appeared in danger of being overtaken and smothered by trees and shrubs. The fact that the house, like most on the street, was relatively new only added to the atmosphere of decrepitude. Miriam thought it most unwelcoming. Even so, she clutched her shopping bag tightly to herself and marched on, for this house had become the locus of her suspicion.

The facts had formed a pattern in Miriam's mind: The owner, a taciturn and unlikable fat man who worked only intermittently, raised hunting dogs—pure breeds that he advertised for stud services. (It was also rumored that he raised fighting dogs for less humane and legal purposes.) These animals were the reason for the cleared property behind his house, and it was there that he had erected their pens and runs. This much was known.

What was also known was the time frame of the almost nightly eruptions of the neighborhood canines. These had begun almost two weeks before. What was not so well known was the mysterious disappearance of Elizabeth's Pomeranian, which occurred during this same reign of barking, possibly even signaling its onset. Miriam's own loss also occurred under these circumstances.

Lastly, there was the whistler, confirmed now by another, whose eerie forays confined themselves to the area just north of Miriam's home. These things were known, and formed the framework of facts upon which Miriam draped the newly woven garments of her deductions.

With all the conviction of the convert, and a burgeoning sense of hope, Miriam waded through the rank, yellow grass of the yard to beard a dognapper in his den.

The fat man opened the door to Miriam's knocks as if he had been standing just behind it all the while. Startled, she took an

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involuntary step back, as he took a baby step forward, crowding his enormous bulk into the doorway, completely blocking her view of the interior. With a grunt of effort, he twisted slightly to pull the door shut behind him, taking yet another step onto the porch and forcing her almost to the edge. "Yeah?" he wheezed.

Miriam took a steadying breath and addressed the towering, unshaven mound of flab. "You raise dogs, do you not?" she opened.

He regarded her steadily through tiny, unfocused eyes. "Uh-huh." A scent of old food wafted unpleasantly from his frayed clothes, and Miriam wished desperately there was a way to stand further from him.

"Do you sell them?" she queried, her heart beating fast.

"S'what?" he mumbled.

"Sell them. Sell dogs?"

He seemed to mull this over, turning it from one side to the next. "Yeah . . . sometimes. Why?"

"I'm in the market," Miriam stated emphatically.

"S'at so?" He seemed to think it over, absently fingering a piece of lint from his almost invisible belly button, which lay exposed as a result of his inability to button the last few holes on his shirt. Miriam thought she might retch, but steeled herself for Silkie's sake. "Nothin' you'd want," he opined. "Only big dogs. Hunters . . . and such."

"That's exactly what I want," she responded immediately. "Let's take a look at what you've got."

"No," he shot back, for the first time evincing some animation. "Don't have any."

"No dogs," Miriam snapped angrily. "You just said that you sell them."

The fat man looked worried and ran a hand through the slick, thinning strands of hair that barely covered his giant head. "None right now," he insisted, backing up a step towards the door. "All sold."

Miriam was desperate. "I'll order one from you, then," she pleaded. "A corgi! A Cardigan corgi! I'll pay good money! You just see about getting one and I'll pay for it, no questions asked!"

The fat man opened his door and stepped up into the doorway to escape the desperate old woman. "No small dogs," he announced loudly.

"So you know what a corgi looks like," she accused, then quickly reversed herself upon seeing him closing the door. "But that's good, then. You know what I want. I'll pay the going price! Whatever you ask!" she cried out as she heard the metallic snap of a deadbolt slide home.

Full of anger and desperation, Miriam turned from the porch

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and began to hurry around to the side of the house. She would see for herself!

The front door flew back open and the fat man shouted out to her, "Get off my property right now or I'll call the police!"

She didn't believe for a moment that he would risk calling the police, but she knew she would never be able to reach the pens before even he could stop her. Wilting beneath the heavy limitations that age had imposed upon her, she nonetheless pointed an accusing finger in the direction of the fat man. "Give me my dog back," she hissed. "You give me my Silkie!"

"Get outa here, you crazy old bitch. . . . Now!" he thundered, and glared at her as she turned away defeated and frightened. When she reached the street once more, he slammed the door so hard that it reverberated off the neighboring houses like a farewell cannonade.

Miriam knew with the certainty of divine revelation that the fat man had taken her Silkie, and what she must do. The thought of the house-bred corgi languishing in one of his feces-strewn pens, deprived of the affection she was accustomed to, drove Miriam to desperation. She had read disturbing stories in the papers of pets being used as bait to hone the killing skills of fighting dogs. Could that be the reason for the disappearance of Silkie and Dakota? She couldn't allow herself to think of such a possibility. Come nightfall, she would act.

As she lay on her bed trying to rest and regain her composure for the task ahead, she reviewed the events of the previous evenings, her left hand absently stroking the small depression in the mattress left by her absent companion. All that had happened pointed the finger of suspicion, nay, accusation, at the odious, obese neighbor. He raised dogs for income and therefore understood the value of them. More important, he was in a position to find buyers. And buyers were something he would be in great need of since his wife had left him, taking both the children and, according to neighborhood gossip, the greatest portion of his income. "My God," she chuckled bitterly. "His grocery bill alone must demand a six-figure salary."

In any case, his house was just across the street and one north of her own—the exact location of the whistling. And now that she had stood close enough to the man to fully appreciate his enormous girth, the whistling itself proved a more understandable piece of the whole. There was no way that the fat man could even consider physically abducting a dog. The very thought of someone of that bulk attempting stealth was ludicrous. No, Miriam mused angrily, he relied on tempting and luring the poor beasts into his clutches. No doubt after driving the animals to distraction with

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his eerie call, and relying on their strength, or ingenuity, to find a way out to investigate, he waited in the safety of his own yard with a tasty reward and a stalwart leash or, worse yet, one of those hideous pole-and-noose contraptions that the dog wardens use. After that . . . what? Could there really be some kind of market for middle-aged dogs of unpopular breed? The alternative was too awful to contemplate.

"Dear God," Miriam prayed aloud to the empty room. "Please don't let him have hurt my little Silkie."

Moments later she fell asleep and began to grind her teeth.

When she awoke, the day had long since slipped away and the darkness it left behind confused and alarmed her. Miriam sat up in a panic to check the time, astounded that she had slept so long, and perplexed by the ache in her jaw. The clock read eleven-forty P.M. Almost the witching hour, she thought uncomfortably.

Nonetheless, she hurried downstairs, not wishing to turn on any lights and possibly betray her intentions. Finding her good walking shoes and a light jacket, she fumbled these on. Scurrying into the kitchen, she risked turning on the light over the stove just long enough to find the large metal flashlight her husband had always kept in a state of readiness there. Flicking off the stove light, she nervously switched on the torch. Miraculously, it seemed to her, a brilliant beam shot forth across the room, throwing a kitchen chair into sharp relief. Miriam hastily switched it off, not wishing to waste the batteries. Her husband had been a very careful and thorough man, but little of this had worn off on Miriam and she feared for the life of the batteries, unable to remember the last time she had thought to replace them. Just before letting herself out the back door, she retrieved Silkie's leash from its nail, coiled it tightly, and shoved it securely into a pocket. Within moments, she was making her way cautiously to the front of the house, confident that she made her way into the night world unseen.

She angled across her own front yard, making a beeline in the dark for the fat man's property. With satisfaction, she noted that not a single light shone from that direction, and her confidence increased. All she need do was make her way down his driveway in the darkness. With the small aid of the distant streetlight, she felt that this was something she could accomplish without too much chance of revealing herself. Once she reached the end of the drive, however, she would be at the wood line and it was at this point that it would be necessary to use the flashlight in order to find the path to the dog kennels. In addition, and the thought made her mouth go suddenly dry, the odds were that the fat man's dogs would not let her incursion go unnoticed. Even so, the thought that she might recognize Silkie's voice amongst them

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steadied her, and she marched on.

But when she stepped into the winding, deserted street, it was not the fat man's dogs that rose in protest, but a distant chorus of canine voices to the south that rolled like an ocean swell towards the dark shore upon which she stood. Puzzled, Miriam stopped to listen, an inexplicable sense of alarm having claimed her. Momentarily, the rolling sound of doggie protests and alarms traversed the small woods that separated her neighborhood from that to the south and entered her own, the neighborhood dogs taking it up with gusto.

Something niggled at her brain, disturbing her earlier thought processes: The barking disturbance arrived from the south; as it had on previous nights, she now realized. Yet the whistle came from the north . . . the fat man, undoubtedly. But the barking preceded the whistling. That didn't make sense if it was the source of the disturbance. Hadn't the whistle preceded the barking before? Or had she got that wrong? There was no whistling now and still the dogs were frantic.

As if in answer, the whistle began, low and clear. It was almost sweet in its plaintiveness; more like a plea than a demand. Miriam began to walk rapidly in its direction, more sure than ever of its origin, yet less sure now of its meaning. She thought she could just make out the hulking outline of the fat man in the darkness of his front porch.

She paused, uncertain of just how to proceed now that confrontation was inevitable. At the same moment, she became aware that the clicking sound had ceased also. It wasn't until then that she realized she'd been hearing something just beneath the barking and baying. Something almost inaudible beyond the blood rushing in her ears. A steady click, click, click that almost, but not quite, mimicked her own steps from the moment she had entered the street.

She took several more steps to test her theory, a surge of hope welling up in her chest that was rewarded with a soft, repetitive clatter. She recognized the sound! It was the unmistakable noise of unclipped nails striking the asphalt. The nails of a spoiled little brat dog who hated the clippers!

With a cry of joy, Miriam spun about, switching on the flashlight and instinctively pulling Silkie's leash from her pocket. The cry died, stillborn, as the light framed the creature, its eyes glowing green and pinpointed by the harsh illumination, its stalking arrested by the sudden aggressive display of its intended prey. The leash slithered from Miriam's paralyzed fingers to coil uselessly on the tarmac.

Miriam suddenly understood everything and mourned for her Silkie. The beast's gray muzzle curled to bare its deadly array of wares in silent acknowledgement of its intent, while the beam of light that seemed to hold it at bay suddenly dimmed and winked

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out. Miriam, remembering quite clearly now that it had been several years since she had replaced the batteries, turned mechanically towards home for more; behind her there came a low, menacing growl.

The fat man closed the door behind him as quietly as his quaking bulk would allow and eased himself down onto his splayed sofa, breathing heavily through his nostrils. He feared an asthma attack was imminent.

It was not his fault, and if the old woman had left well enough alone, he might have succeeded and all would now be well. But he had seen the sudden flash of light on the street and the awful tableau it revealed, and had heard the terrible yet strangely quiet struggle that ensued. And he knew, without seeing, the inevitable conclusion. All over a stupid little dog! If she had just kept clear, he might have lured the animal back in.

He shook his head violently, spraying the cluttered room with droplets of sweat. What a mistake! What a stupid mistake he had made in buying the wolf! Besides being illegal, it had been incredibly wrong-headed. The damn thing just would not cooperate in his scheme to breed hybrids—a hugely profitable enterprise by all accounts.

It would not mate with any of his dogs and had eventually killed them all. To add insult to injury, it had resisted all attempts at even rudimentary training, responding only to his whistle for dinner—gliding out of the crate it dwelt in to glare at the fat man with baleful, challenging eyes through the chain links of its confinement, as if daring him to reach through or enter. Wisely, the fat man had contented himself with simply heaving chunks of raw meat over the fence.

Several days after it had slaughtered the last of his dogs, the wolf had demonstrated its contempt by escaping, leaving a silent, barren kennel in its wake.

Since then, every effort at surreptitiously recapturing the animal had failed. Taking his cue that the wolf was near from the uproar of the neighbors' dogs, the fat man had left trails of raw steak and lamb leading to its repaired pen, then whistled to let it know that dinner was on. In the beginning, the wolf had eaten the offerings, though avoiding the last, which lay inside its former prison, as if well aware of the clever, spring-loaded gate. In time it spurned even those, finding its skills at hunting undiminished by its confinement and game . . . abundant.

After the death of his dogs and the escape of the wolf, the attendant monetary losses, and this last unfortunate incident, the fat man could take solace in only one thing—he had told no one of his unlucky purchase, and certainly never would. ●

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The Perfectionist

by Helen Tucker

Old Carlo Farase stood on the side of the road, along with a dozen or so other locals, and watched the dismantling (he refused to think the stronger word, "gutting") of the villa. He cringed with every sound of wood splitting and tile being broken, while the other observers merely moved closer to the destruction, eager to see what the inside of the villa had been in its glory days.

He stood as still as though he were carved in stone, physically unable to move while he nursed his silent grief. His sparse gray hair blew slightly in the light breeze, the only thing about him that moved. His craggy face was set in a severe frown, and his dark eyes were ringed with tears that refused to spill. In his seventy-five years, he had never experienced a feeling such as this: as though his life were being torn apart, exposed to the world of the curious.

He knew there was one other person in the group whose heart was heavy also: Rosa Marcetti. She, like Carlo, had known every inch of the villa intimately, having spent years serving the Baronessa Katya Dubinski. Carlo was butler, gardener, chauffeur, general handyman, and Rosa was maid, cook, and housekeeper. The baronessa could have afforded as many servants as she wanted, but she wanted only those two. She had been a very private person, treasuring isolation and seclusion as though they were a special benediction from God.

It was one of those gorgeous Mediterranean days when nothing tragic should have been happening, Carlo thought. The sun shone like a golden eye on the little village of Castelmola on top of the

"I had fun writing this story," says author Helen Tucker, "because Taormina is one of my favorite places. The war stories I use in it were told to me by someone who served in the Italian army during the war, and if they aren't true, they should be, for they have become part of Italian lore." Ms. Tucker is a former journalist, a novelist, and a prolific short-story writer. She has been a regular contributor to *EQMM* since 1993. †

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mountain, looking benignly at Taormina midway down, and resting on the Lido di Mazzaro by the blue Ionian Sea. But here in Taormina it could have been, *should* have been, night-black as far as Carlo was concerned. His only consolation was that at least one other person felt as he did. Moving, finally, he looked over at her.

Rosa, looking away from the travesty, spotted Carlo and went to his side. As usual, she was dressed like those widows Carlo thought of as "the black crows," in somber ebony from head to toe. "It is the devil's work," she greeted him.

"No, Rosa, it is what the baronessa wanted," he told her. "In her will she left the villa to her husband's nephew to do with as he pleased, and this . . ." He pointed to the wreckage. ". . . is what pleases him. He wants to make the villa over to his liking."

"I'm surprised he's not having the outside torn down also," Rosa said. Out of habit, the two of them spoke English to each other, because when they worked in the villa, the baronessa had insisted on English. When she first came to the village, the baronessa spoke her native Polish as well as French, German, and English. She also spoke Roman Italian, but not the Sicilian dialect. However, she preferred not to speak *any* Italian. Carlo had a little English because he had worked for an English family, but Rosa had to take a class.

Rosa pushed a strand of her white hair back into the knot on her head. She was about the same age as Carlo, and looked it. "The baronessa died five years ago tomorrow," she said. "Why did the nephew wait so long to claim the villa?"

Carlo shook his head. "Something to do with being in a different country, I think. Laws. Getting it all untangled. Or maybe he took awhile to make up his mind whether to live here or sell."

"Better he should have sold and let someone buy it who would cherish it as the baronessa did." Rosa suddenly clutched Carlo's arm and cried, "Look!"

A new crew of workers had come in and was cutting through and digging up the thick yellow wall that surrounded the villa.

"Dio!" Carlo exclaimed, lapsing into Italian. *"È troppo!"*

Too much! Both of them felt the torture of what was going on, yet neither could bear to leave. They watched silently as the largest part of their lives was being demolished by picks and shovels and hammers and great electric saws.

Eventually some of the onlookers left, having work or families to go to, but the old man and woman stayed on, each immersed in separate memories of their years with the baronessa.

Carlo remembered well the first time he had seen her. The war had just ended; the Allies had defeated the Axis and gone on to fight the Japanese. Carlo, at twenty, had deserted the Italian army because he thought it a lost cause, a stupid cause to begin with,

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and to him Mussolini, now dead, had been nothing but a *buffone.* Carlo returned to Taormina and found work immediately helping to rebuild and restore the bombed-out buildings.

Shirtless, deeply tanned from outdoor labor, he had been working on a wall at the end of the Corso when a long black automobile stopped beside him. A tinted window in the back went down and the most beautiful woman he had ever seen leaned out. "You there!" she called. "Yes, you. Do you speak French or English?"

"Poco Inglese," he said, laying down his trowel.

"Well, if you speak it, *speak* it and don't answer me in Italian," she said. "Italians aren't much better than Germans and I will not use their language."

He stared at her and didn't answer.

"Do you want work?" she asked.

"I have work." He pointed to the wall and the rubble of the building behind it. He could not take his eyes off her. She had golden hair which she wore in a braid around her head like a corona, pale skin, and the bluest eyes he had ever seen. On her left hand, which now held on to the top of the half-lowered glass, were two rings: a wedding band encircled by diamonds and another ring of rubies and emeralds which sparkled like a Christmas ornament.

"I am staying at the Hotel San Dominico," she said. "I will be living here for a while and I am tired of hotels. I want to build a villa on some land I just bought. If you can build, I can use you. And I need others. I want the villa built as soon as possible."

Building a villa would be more interesting than trying to put back bombed-out buildings and—he looked again at the rings—undoubtedly would pay far better than the pittance he made now.

"Yes, madam, I will work for you." He struggled for good English, trying to remember all he had learned from the family he worked for before they had fled back to England when the war started.

"I have one stipulation," she said. "Everything must be perfect. I mean *absolutely* perfect. What is the Italian word for perfect?"

"Perfetto," he said.

She nodded. "I just wanted to be sure you understood. My land is up the road about a mile, overlooking the town. Report to my foreman at six o'clock tomorrow morning."

That had been the beginning. While helping to build the villa, a gray-stone twelve-room house with red-tile roof, he had learned a little about the woman for whom he worked. She was twenty-eight years old, a widow who escaped her native Poland after Germans killed her husband. She had gone first to Vienna and stayed with relatives until her presence put her relatives at risk, then she had set out for Switzerland but had ended up in Roma where she sat out the war in a hotel. Her health suffered; she had several bouts

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with pneumonia, and the doctor tending her suggested she go south for the winter. So when the war ended she went to Taormina where, once again, she was in a hotel. It was no wonder that after years of hotel life she craved her own place.

It took three months to build the villa, a month longer than necessary, Carlo figured, because of the baronessa's obsession with perfection. She was on the scene most of the time, and any little thing that was not to her liking, her idea of perfection, had to be done over. Money, apparently, was no object. In some ways, she was like a child, accepting no substitutes, demanding flawless workmanship, faultless devotion to the job, and unquestioning acquiescence to her wishes. There was some grumbling among the workers, but never in her presence or the complainer would find himself back at a lesser-paying job. Even though she was eight years older than he, Carlo felt protective toward her. Her demand for perfection in everything was just another character trait, and everyone had some trait that might seem a little strange to others. After what she had been through in the war—losing a husband, bounced from one strange place to another, living among the enemy—he could understand her wanting everything to be just right. He respected and, at times, even revered her.

Once the villa was finished, furnishing it began. Some of the furniture was handmade right there in Taormina, but most of it was shipped in from other places, including a little inlaid table from Sorrento which Carlo would never forget. It was a beautiful thing to behold, the colored tiles glistening like jewels. But on one side there was a tiny tile that was just the least bit askew, something the average eye would never notice.

"It must go back," the baronessa told Carlo. "Send it back."

"But, Baronessa, no one will ever notice that little flaw," he said. "Also, that side of the table can go against the wall."

"Send it back," she said. "Immediately."

Once the furnishings were in place, the workmen left. That was when the baronessa asked Carlo if he would like to stay on and work for her, and he said yes at once. Rosa Marcetti was hired shortly thereafter.

Carlo looked at Rosa now, noting the tears still cascading down her cheeks. "At least she didn't have to witness this," he said, trying to be of some comfort.

"God be thanked for small mercies," Rosa said.

It was growing dusk when they noticed those tearing down the yellow wall had stopped working and were gathered in a little group at one corner of the wall, all jabbering like a flock of startled birds.

"What is it?" Rosa asked. "What are they doing?

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Carlo didn't answer; he had already started walking toward the group. Rosa followed.

Several of the men were crossing themselves and backing away, and all was stillness now, an ominous silence. Carlo and Rosa reached the edge of the group and stopped. There was no need to go further. They could see plainly the small, mostly decayed wooden box that held the bones, the unmistakable skeleton of a baby.

"Bambino! Bambino!" one of the diggers said unnecessarily.

"Mother of God!" Rosa whispered while Carlo crossed himself.

Rosa held Carlo's arm for support. "Carlo, it is her baby," she whispered. "I delivered that baby. See the crooked bones of the right foot and leg? Her baby was deformed. She said she sent him to Vienna with her cousin when the cousin came to visit. He was to have an operation on the leg there, she said. And then he died, she told me. She said . . . Oh, Mother of God!" And Rosa crossed herself and fell to her knees.

Carlo helped her up. "Rosa, get hold of yourself. Say nothing to anyone. We must not have bad talk in the town about the baronessa. No one will know that it was her baby except us."

"I thought he was buried in Vienna," Rosa said. "Why wasn't he given a Christian burial? How did he get back here?"

"Perhaps there was a Christian burial we didn't know about," Carlo said.

"We would have known," Rosa said.

Carlo looked away from the pitiful box. "It is better that we go now. Go home to your family, Rosa, and I will go to my room. Say nothing to anyone about what we have seen."

Rosa pointed to the box. "This will be all over town in fifteen minutes. I wonder if the father knows what happened to the baby."

"The father?"

"I've always thought it was the American writer—that Soames man—the one who came for a visit and stayed several weeks. But, of course, there was also the English painter—Jerome Petree, I think his name was—the one who painted the picture of the villa that hung in the salotto. He also stayed a long time."

Carlo nodded but said nothing. He remembered seeing Soames coming out of the baronessa's bedroom late at night, but only the one time. Soames, before closing the door, had said, "Goodnight, sweet Katie." And Carlo had heard the baronessa say, "My name is Katya, not some American abbreviation."

"But you could easily pass for an American," the man had said, as though the height of every European's aspirations was to be thought American.

"Not a chance," the baronessa's voice came through the cracked door. "You know why?"

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"Tell me."

"Because I wouldn't dream of ruining a good drink with ice." There was laughter within and without. And then Soames had said, "Goodnight, Katya, my Polish beauty."

Carlo, who hadn't liked the man from the first, now disliked him intensely because he thought Soames was playing up to the baronessa. He was not good enough for her, not nearly good enough. An opportunist who spent his life "visiting" people.

"We must not let a word of this get out," he said to Rosa. "The town must remember her as the gracious lady she was."

"Who could have buried the baby here? Who could have *killed* him?" Rosa was moaning as though in pain. "It could not have been the baronessa; I'll never believe that."

"No, it could not have been the baronessa," Carlo repeated. "We must never let anyone think that." He patted her shoulder and then started walking down the road to the Corso. He turned once and put his finger to his lips and mouthed the words, "Say nothing." He could not bear the thought of the baronessa's name being besmirched.

Halfway down the hillside he jumped to the side of the road as an official car with three *carabinieri* inside sped past him. One of the men was the husband of Carlo's niece, in whose house he rented a room. He was not surprised to see the car turn in at the ruins of the villa.

Rosa had a husband and two small children when she began working at the villa, so she went home every night, but Carlo had no family except a married sister, two nieces, and a nephew, so he moved into a room at the back of the villa, where he remained until the death of the baronessa. Then, his sister having died ten years before, he rented the room in the home of his niece, Elena, and her husband, Gianni Bertelli, who thought wearing the ornate uniform of the *carabinieri* the greatest honor that could ever befall him.

Carlo was sure that when Gianni got off work tonight he would go straight home and ask question after question of him about the baronessa, because who would know more about her than the man who had worked for her for fifty years?

After the war, tourists were slow in returning to Taormina. For one thing, it took awhile to rebuild, and for another, money was not plentiful anywhere in Europe after years of hardship and, in some cases, scrounging for the necessities just to stay alive. But after a while foreigners began to trickle in again, coming from Switzerland, France, England, and even a few from America. In a few years, there was a small Anglo-American colony of writers, artists, and musicians. These were the people with whom the

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baronessa did her small amount of socializing. She received many invitations, some by virtue of her title, some out of pure curiosity, but eventually the invitations came because she was a beautiful, gracious, aristocratic lady whom any host felt honored to have grace his table or cocktail party. Carlo was sure of this. However, she accepted only a few of the many hospitable overtures, seeming to prefer quiet evenings at home in her perfect villa, listening to opera on her record player or reading. She entertained infrequently with a cocktail party followed by dinner. On these occasions she offered to bring in more help for Carlo and Rosa, but they told her they could manage, and they did.

Carlo was thinking about these long-ago days as he walked to the Corso that night for his nocturnal cappuccino. He had never much liked the drink, thinking it *touristi,* but the baronessa had, and now he drank it in her memory.

He sat at a front table outside the Mocambo. Looking straight across the Corso and small piazza, he watched the line of red running down the dark sky like blood from an open wound. Etna was spilling her guts again, lava flowing down the side. One of these days there would be another big eruption like the one that had all but done away with Catania years ago.

But first would come the eruption right here in town when it became known that the baby bones had been found on the baronessa's property.

As though vocalizing his thoughts, a voice beside him said, "Carlo, what are we to do? The world has exploded."

Rosa stood beside his table, her hands clutched in front of her as though beginning a prayer, her eyes as wild as a trapped animal's. Though she was a widow and he unmarried, she would not sit at the table with him "to give the wrong idea."

He stood up, took her arm, and walked her away from the crowded tables. "Rosa, stop worrying. Only you and I know that the baronessa had a child, and unless you mouth off when you shouldn't, no one will ever know. Everyone will think some unfortunate girl chose that place to bury her sin."

"Your nephew, Gianni, came to my house this evening and questioned me," she said. "I am not a good liar, Carlo."

"You didn't tell?" He drew in his breath.

"No, I said I didn't know anything about it."

"Good! Continue to say that."

"I am on my way to the Duomo now to confess my sin."

"*Dio!* You are not going to tell the priest!"

"No, I am going to confess that I have lied."

"But he will know what you lied about. Rosa, you mustn't say anything to *anybody.*"

"I must not die with a sin on my conscience, either."

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"You're healthy, in no danger of dying anytime soon. Just keep quiet, please. For the baronessa's sake. Do not destroy her good reputation."

"Carlo, I don't believe that baby was ever sent to Vienna. I don't believe he ever left the villa, and if she killed her baby . . ."

"You and I both know she was incapable of hurting anything. As for killing . . . Impossible!"

"For her sake, I will do as you say, Carlo." Without another word, she left him standing in the Corso.

So Gianni had questioned Rosa. That was why he himself had not been put through the inquisition that night. But it would be coming shortly.

He went to the rail behind the Wonderbar on the other side of the street and stared down at the Via Roma and then down the mountain to the sea. The lights of Mazzaro twinkled on the coast, and a little further along the whistle of a train could be heard as it passed through Giardini. It was nearly ten o'clock and the Corso was not so crowded now. It was mostly the locals, having their nightly *passagiata*. He was sure their topic of conversation as they walked was the find at the villa.

Even though the town was a thriving tourist mecca now, with cruise ships docking daily at Messina and sending thousands of shoppers to Taormina, Carlo had liked the place much better before it had become overrun by bargain hunters thronging the Corso shops, pushing aside the locals, leaving in their wake, along with their money, litter, hard feelings, and extra work to get ready for the next day's onslaught. But the merchants were happy.

The baronessa, who had planned to live in her perfect villa only one winter, fell in love with the town, though she would never have admitted to that strong a feeling for anything Italian. She had let Carlo know early on that her hatred of Italians was exceeded only by her hatred of Germans.

"I suppose you fought with the Italians," she said early in his employment. They were standing behind the villa where he was starting a garden.

"I was in the army, yes," he said; then, knowing it would please her, "But I deserted."

"When did you desert?"

"I deserted at Solerno. If I had had a choice, I would have fought with the Allies. I did not want to kill them. Or be killed by them."

"Would you have killed Italians?"

"No, Baronessa. I am not at heart a killer."

"What did you think of Mussolini?" It was as though she were giving him some kind of test. Perhaps a test of loyalty to her.

"I thought him stupid," he said honestly. "A *buffone.*"

"Speak English, please."

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He smiled, knowing that she understood a lot more Italian than she let on. "Most Italians did not want the war. At first they did not take it seriously, the fighting."

"I wonder how many more Allies they would have killed if they had taken it seriously," she said, sarcasm obvious.

"Once it was reported that an enemy ship was off the coast of Sicily, about to attack," he said. "So the Italian Navy sent a ship to blow the enemy out of the water. A battle raged between the two ships all night. By morning light they saw that both ships flew the Italian flag. It came to be known as the Italo-Italian war."

She clapped her hands like a child and laughed.

In many ways, she was childlike, and that was why he had felt protective toward her.

It was late, nearly eleven, before he went back to his room. In front of the house were two official cars. One, he knew, was the car Gianni drove.

Waiting for him on the side of the house at the door to his room was Natale Petrusi, head of the *polizia.* So while Gianni was all right to talk to Rosa, they had sent the big fish to swim around with Carlo.

"Buono sera, Carlo." Petrusi was a giant of a man, towering over Carlo, with shoulders so wide they stretched out like a shelf. He had thick black hair, which was beginning to gray a bit around the edges, and a thick moustache and eyebrows. If he ever smiled, no one would know, because the moustache would hide the smile at the mouth, and the brows would hide the eyes.

"Come in, Natale. I'm sure you're here about the box found at the baronessa's villa."

"What else?" He followed Carlo into the room and looked around as though searching for contraband. What he saw was a bed, a dresser, a couple of chairs, a small table, a makeshift bookcase that held more pictures than books, and a radio on top. The rug on the floor was an old Persian carpet which the baronessa had given Carlo for his room at the villa when she replaced it with an Oriental in the salotto. When he had finished his inspection, Natale sat down in one of the chairs and said, *"Alora,* Carlo, what can you tell me about this sorry business?"

"Nothing, Natale. I can't tell you anything at all."

"The conclusion everyone seems to be drawing is that the baronessa had a child out of wedlock and killed it."

"Impossible!" Carlo spat the word out, wanting to scream it but controlling himself.

"Why do you say that?"

"I knew the baronessa, probably better than anyone with the

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exception of Rosa Marcetti, and I know she would never kill anything, certainly not another human being."

"Then there's no one else who could have done it, except you or Rosa. Unless the baronessa hired someone . . ."

"Stupido!" This time Carlo allowed himself to raise his voice. He could not keep calm any longer. "Any unfortunate girl could have buried the baby there to hide her sin. She could have come in the dark of night."

The big man shook his head. "The gate in the wall was always kept locked. You know that. No one could have climbed the wall."

"With a ladder, anyone could." Carlo stared the man down. "Besides, if the baronessa was out at night, the gate was not locked until her return. I locked it myself. Why are you so eager to think it was the baronessa's baby?"

"We know it wasn't Rosa's. Who else could it have belonged to?"

"I told you, Natale. Some unfortunate girl . . ." Carlo stood up, hoping his uninvited guest would get the hint. "Whatever happened was so long ago that whoever did it probably is dead by now."

"And you can tell me nothing that will help us?"

"Absolutely nothing."

He left, finally, and Carlo went to bed, but sleep was as far away from him as his beloved baronessa, who had been taken back to Poland and now rested beside her husband, whom the Germans had slain.

He had been desolate when her body was sent back to Poland for burial. He wanted her here, where he could place flowers upon her grave. But in her will, which had been written shortly after she came to Taormina and which she had never changed, she stated unequivocally that she was to be buried beside her husband. She had not wanted her final repose to be in Italian soil.

But she had come to like Italians; Carlo was sure of this. Her voice lost that hard edge when she talked about them, and sometimes on the rare occasions when she entertained, there were Italians among the guests.

Carlo felt he had had something to do with her change of feeling. He never spoke ill of any local, never grumbled about natives in her presence. He remembered one night when he had awakened and heard a noise in the kitchen. Hurriedly he put on his robe, went through the narrow passageway from his room to the kitchen, and found her sitting at the table crying. On the table in front of her were a cup of tea and a piece of shortbread.

"Baronessa!" he exclaimed. "Are you ill? What can I do for you?"

She had on a white negligee of silk and lace and the top of a blue lace nightgown showed at the neckline. She looked up at him

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with reddened eyes, obviously embarrassed at having been found showing emotion. "Go back to bed, Carlo. I am all right."

"But no . . ." He was undecided. He couldn't leave her like this, but he felt self-conscious staying.

Suddenly she gave him a small smile. "Would you like a cup of tea? Have one, and tell me more about how the Italians helped lose the war."

He would have liked a cup of tea, but drinking it standing up would have been awkward and, of course, he would not sit down at the table with her.

"There is one story about *Il Duce,*" he said. "The Italian Air Force had a super-bomber, an aircraft with every known modern device for blowing up cities and blowing other planes out of the sky. Mussolini decided that every airbase in the country should have one of these bombers, so he gave the order, saying he would inspect each one when they were ready." She leaned forward, interested.

"So finally *Il Duce* was informed that the bombers were ready for inspection and he was taken to the first airbase. He went through the plane, happy with the results, then commanded his driver to take him to the next airbase. This went on all day. He was driven from one base to another where he inspected the planes. However, he was inspecting the same plane at each base. While he was being driven, the plane was flown from base to base. There never was but one."

He had never seen her laugh so much or so long. He was glad that he had helped her, at least for the moment, forget whatever it was that had made her cry. Had she been thinking about her dead husband, or was it one of those men who had come and stayed and stayed?

Carlo remembered them well. Radley Soames was a writer, or claimed to be. The baronessa had met him at a dinner given by one of the Anglo-American colony. It seemed that Soames manifested such an interest in seeing the baronessa's perfect villa that she had invited him to tea the next day, and then—Carlo could not imagine how—had been induced to invite him to spend a few days there. In Carlo's mind, the man was a professional visitor, but the baronessa apparently found him amusing, for he ended up staying nearly three weeks before going on to Firenze to "visit some friends there."

And then there was Jerome Petree, the artist. He was a handsome young man who openly courted the baronessa. He inveigled an invitation to stay at the villa by saying he "really must, absolutely *must,* paint this superb Eden." He did paint it, a very good picture, if Carlo was any judge, but the painting went better than his courtship of his patroness. Though all seemed to be going

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well between them, Petree, when Carlo took his breakfast to his room one morning, stated that he would need a ride to Giardini to get the train for Roma. He left without saying goodbye to the baronessa.

Carlo had not liked either of the men, though he couldn't have said why, except that he thought them both leeches who were taking advantage of the baronessa's generous nature. He was glad to see each of them go. Although the baronessa had not mentioned Petree's unexpected departure, she had seemed a bit downcast for a day or two after he left.

Once in a great while the baronessa entertained a couple overnight or for a longer stay, but Soames and Petree were the only two unattached men who visited the villa for more than a few hours.

Carlo was thinking about the two of them when, exhausted, he finally drifted into a dreamless sleep.

A week passed and, as both Carlo and Rosa had predicted, the box of baby bones found at the villa was the main, and almost the only, topic of conversation among the townspeople. Even the cruise-ship shoppers found the Corso merchants preoccupied. The mood everywhere seemed to be dismal, due partly to the rain which descended in torrents for two straight days, followed by two more days of low-hanging clouds and darkened spirits.

On the fifth day, when the sun finally reappeared, Carlo started up the road to watch the work of gutting the villa continued, then thought better of it. Not only was it thoroughly depressing, but also he had no wish to come in contact again with the *polizia*. He was determined to protect the reputation of the baronessa, to keep the villagers from thinking that she had killed her baby. As he and Rosa had said repeatedly, the baronessa would not kill anything or anyone . . . though Carlo said this more forcefully than Rosa.

He went back to the piazza near the Duomo and sat in the sun. He remembered the day he and Rosa had discovered the baronessa was pregnant. She had been wearing loose clothing and gaining weight for a while, but neither of them had connected it with pregnancy. It was Rosa, as she and Carlo were eating their lunch in the kitchen, who whispered, "Carlo, do you think the baronessa is expecting a child?"

"What?" Carlo thought he had misheard.

"She has been gaining weight for a while." Rosa still whispered, although there was no need to. The baronessa was in the garden.

"And she does not dress with her usual style," Rosa continued.

"I . . . hadn't noticed," Carlo said slowly.

"Men never notice these things as quickly as women," Rosa said, and Carlo frowned at her superiority even as he admitted to himself that, yes, there was something different about the baronessa.

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"Do you think the father is Soames or Petree?" Rosa asked.

"Watch yourself, woman! You don't even know if there *is* a baby." Carlo rose from the table and took his dishes to the sink.

But Rosa had been right; the baby was born a couple of months later. The baronessa refused to have the doctor in attendance, demanding that Rosa, who had three children of her own, act as midwife, and the two servants were sworn to secrecy. "The baby belongs to me, not to the gossips of the town," she told them, this even before she had been told that the baby was deformed.

Two weeks later, Carlo drove the baby and the baronessa to the hospital in Messina where she consulted a bone specialist about the baby's pitiful leg. She was told that a number of operations would improve the leg, but not correct it, and that it would always be shorter than the other leg. The child would have to wear a brace and a built-up shoe all his life.

The baronessa sat in the backseat of the automobile with the baby on the seat beside her on the ride home, and she never spoke a word nor uttered a sound.

That night, as Carlo served her dinner in the small dining room, he thought he heard her whisper, "What am I to do?" and he saw tears running down her cheeks. He said nothing; it wasn't his place to speak.

He was about to go home to see what Elena had prepared for his lunch when he saw Gianni hurrying toward him.

"Carlo, you must come," his nephew said. "You are wanted at headquarters."

"Why?" His heart skipped a beat. "I've told them everything I can."

"Rosa is there. She has told all."

"All what?" Carlo could actually feel the blood draining from his face.

"Natale thought she was not telling the whole truth the other day, so he sent for her. He said if she came to official rooms instead of the comfort of her own home, he could break her down, and he did."

"What has she said?"

"That the baby was the baronessa's, that she had delivered it, and that the baronessa had sent the baby off where it could receive care that she could not give it. Rosa said she doesn't know how the baby got back to Taormina or buried under the wall."

"I can't tell more than that, either," Carlo said.

"But you can verify what Rosa said . . . or refute it," Gianni said.

Carlo let out something between a sigh and a groan and walked with Gianni down the Corso to headquarters. He was furious at Rosa for besmirching the reputation of the baronessa, who was dead and couldn't defend herself.

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He was taken to a little room at the rear of the station where he found Rosa, in her black widow's weeds, seated at a table, red-eyed, her hands clutched on top of the table, her knuckles white. "I had to tell them, Carlo," she said, as though apologizing to him. "I couldn't lie anymore."

Natale Petrusi walked in at that point, looked from one to the other, and politely invited Carlo to sit down at the table as though he were about to serve a wondrous repast.

"I can't add anything to what Rosa has already told you," Carlo said immediately.

"The baby was the baronessa's?" The head of the *polizia* stood beside Carlo gazing down at him, his expression registering nothing.

"According to Rosa," Carlo said. "I was not present at the birthing. Natale, the baronessa has been dead these five years. She was seventy-eight when she died, an old woman. Why must you bring all this up now? Let her rest in peace."

"When a body is found, we must look into it. If murder is done, we must find the murderer." Now his face was stern. "The laboratory in Catania that examined the bones says the skeleton is at least forty years old. Someone has gotten away with this crime for a long time."

Carlo stared down at the table. "Why are you sure a crime was committed? How do you know the baby didn't die of some disease?"

"The body would not have been hidden under a wall," Natale said. "The child would have been buried in the cemetery after a service in the Duomo."

"All I can tell you is that the baronessa never murdered anyone," Carlo said vehemently, and Rosa nodded.

"Who was the father of the baby?" Natale asked, as though this question had just occurred to him.

"We don't know," Rosa said. "We can only guess. It might have been an Englishman or an American."

"And where can I find them?"

Carlo threw up his hands in a helpless gesture. "God knows. Those two were here forty or more years ago and neither has been seen since. Neither knew there was a baby. Let it rest, Natale. Let the dead rest in peace. Enough damage was done by digging up the bones."

There was a long silence during which Rosa nodded, agreeing with Carlo. Finally, Natale also nodded and shrugged. "Yes, too much time has passed. There is no way to get answers to the questions now. *Il omicidio perfetto.*" The perfect homicide.

"Then we may go now?" Carlo stood up.

Natale nodded again, and Carlo quickly took Rosa's arm, helped her up, and steered her out of the room and the station.

Outside in the street, Rosa stopped. "Carlo, I'm sorry. I had to tell

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that it was the baronessa's baby. Natale kept asking me question after question and saying that I hadn't told him everything I knew."

"He was bullying you?"

"In a way. I suppose it showed on my face that I wasn't telling the truth, at least not the whole truth. I'm sorry, Carlo."

He patted her shoulder. "All right, Rosa. It couldn't be helped."

She went down the steps leading to the Via Roma and her home, her head bowed, and Carlo went up the road to his own home. He was no longer interested in lunch; he only wanted to rest. He was completely spent from the session, so tired that he wasn't sure he could get up the incline to the street where he lived.

Once in his room, he lay down on the bed without removing clothes or even shoes. All he could think about was the baronessa and the harm that had been done to her this day. He wanted her memory to remain as clear and beautiful and perfect in the town as it had in his mind and heart, as gracious and kind as she herself had been.

He had given her fifty years of service and loyalty and, yes, even love. But in the end it had not been enough; he could not keep the town from talking about her now, speculating, inventing stories, damning her as though she had been a demon—a foreign demon at that. In the end he had failed her. She had wanted perfection in everything . . . and he had tried to see that she had it.

As she grew older, her obsession had not decreased. He remembered the day the stemware she had ordered from the glass factory in Venezia had arrived. She unpacked it herself and looked at it as carefully as though she were an inspector. There was a tiny flaw, almost unnoticeable to the naked eye, in one of the glasses.

"Carlo, please pack these up and return them. I will not accept flawed merchandise."

By this time he knew better than to try to change her mind. In spite of the inconvenience, he had to admire her habit of accepting only that which was good.

She had aged gracefully and was as beautiful in her sixties and seventies, though in a different way, as she had been in her twenties and thirties. After the death of the baby, she became a little more social, accepting more invitations, entertaining more. Carlo was never sure why this was so, but he was glad she was not so much alone anymore, that she seemed to enjoy other people's company.

On a frigid day in February, an unusually cold day for that area, she had caught a cold which had gone into pneumonia. The doctor had visited her twice, but when she showed no improvement, Carlo and Rosa had taken her to the hospital in Messina. She stayed almost a week, but seemed to get no better. Then one morning when Carlo went into her room, she said, "I am going home, Carlo. Put my things into my suitcase and take it to the car."

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"But, Baronessa, are you well enough?"

She gave him a wan smile. "I am too sick to remain in this forlorn place. I am going home."

In spite of the fact that she still looked desperately ill, Carlo felt a certain elation. For the first time in all those years, she had referred to the villa, to Taormina, as home.

She lay in the backseat of the car on the trip and he and Rosa helped her into the house when they arrived at the villa. After Rosa had put her to bed, she found Carlo in the kitchen.

"She is going to die," Rosa told him. "She knows it."

Carlo had known it also, but he had not admitted it even to himself. "No, Rosa, you are mistaken. The doctor at the hospital let her come home. He wouldn't have done that unless he thought she was better."

"He let her come home to die." Rosa crossed herself.

Carlo went to the baronessa's bedroom and knocked at the door. If she answered, he did not hear, but he opened the door and went in anyway. She was in bed, her head raised on two pillows.

"Yes, Carlo?" she said weakly.

"Just wanted to see if you needed anything, Baronessa," he said.

"Come here."

He went to the bedside, and she took his hand. "Thank you, Carlo."

"I have done nothing, Baronessa."

Her hand tightened on his and then went slack. "Thank you, Carlo," she said again, and those were her last words.

Now Carlo sat up in bed as tears ran unchecked down his cheeks. "I tried, Baronessa," he whispered. "God knows I tried to protect you."

He lay down again and soon was asleep. He awoke to the sound of someone rapping at the inside door of his room. The door was opened and Elena came in. "Were you asleep? Are you ill, Zio Carlo?"

He sat up and swung his feet to the floor. "Just tired, so tired," he said.

"Shall I bring your dinner to you here?"

"No, I will eat with the family, but first there is something I must do."

He went to the outside door. "I'll be back shortly."

He walked hurriedly down the hill, not wanting to keep the family waiting any longer than necessary. Down at the Corso, he went straight to the Duomo and entered. He put his finger in the holy water, crossed himself, and went straight to the row of votive candles beneath the statue of the Holy Mother. There he lit a candle for his dead son, as he had done every night since he had smothered the imperfect baby and buried him beneath the villa wall. ●

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RETIREMENT PLAN

by Neil Schofield

Ernest Holroyd thought, "And *no one* knows I am here." Then he did a little celebratory dance—perhaps not so much a dance as an awkward little shuffle, because he was not, and never had been, what you might call a dancing man—but nonetheless, it was a celebration and he felt he had saluted the occasion.

It was his first day down here—or, to be accurate, his first proper day, the first he could *call* a day. He had, of course, been up and down innumerable times over the last few months, whenever Beryl was absent from the house, carrying his secret cargoes.

Neil Schofield worked as a writer and producer for "industrial theatre" before trying his hand at fiction. Although he only started writing short stories in 1999, he has already sold nearly a dozen of them. The darkly comic turn of some of the pieces is reminiscent of Robert Barnard (who also has a story in this issue). As you'll see, Mr. Schofield has a talent for surprise endings. We'll have more of his work for you later this year.

This morning he had risen at the usual time, dressed, and left the bedroom quietly in his stocking feet. Not so quietly, however, that Beryl did not hear him. As he went down the stairs, he heard her voice, querulous as always in the early morning, well, querulous as it *always* was, calling after him to be sure and put out the dustbins, and to be sure not to forget to leave a cheque for George. He was very careful to do both, because he was a well-trained man. After obeying both instructions and eating his breakfast of toast and tea alone at the table in the middle of the enormous kitchen, he put on his coat and hat, picked up his briefcase, and opened the kitchen door.

He called out, "I'm off, then." There was no answer, but he hadn't expected one. Beryl was never truly conscious until ten, and hardly ever up until eleven.

He slammed the kitchen door from the inside and locked it with

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the large Chubb key. Then he tiptoed—needlessly, he thought, but you could never be sure—to the cellar door. He pushed the light time-switch, closed the door after him, locked it, and went down the stone steps. He crossed the cellar, picking his way through the junk, the trunks, the old furniture, the packing cases, and all the other detritus, to the left-hand wall. There he opened his secret door and he was in. Once the door was closed securely, he switched on the lights, took off his coat, and did his little dance.

He sat down in the large red wing chair, gazed around him, and found it good. He had everything he needed. At last he was really and truly retired. He smiled to himself a little sourly as he thought of the party which had been held for him the day before at the office.

He had resisted the party. He had protested that since he was taking retirement at the—everyone admitted—early age of fifty-five, it didn't really merit a party. And he felt privately that, since he had hated every single minute of the thirty-five years he had spent in the place, remaining there for a further pointless half-hour was the last thing he needed. But they had insisted, or at least the board had insisted, on some sort of do, and he had been forced to accede. So, at half-past five, he had been shepherded into the boardroom, where all the directors and the rest of the executive staff stood, shiftily waiting. There was a table with plates of petit-fours, smoked salmon sandwiches, and some bottles of half-hearted champagne—not, he was pained to note, the Directors' Reserve, but some second-rank house he had never heard of.

There was a presentation. He accepted with voluminous thanks, far beyond what the occasion merited, the chiming clock. And then the whole thing degenerated into a drink-up, during which he had to circulate, responding with equally counterfeit gratitude to all the insincere wishes for his continued good health and happiness. At one point, Melchett, the marketing director, a florid man whom Ernest had always detested, hove up at his side.

"Beryl not here?" he asked. Ernest noticed that mixed in with the assumed air of surprise there was some relief. Beryl had not been loved by his colleagues on the very rare occasions on which she had agreed to meet them.

"No, unhappily," he said. "Illness in the family, I'm afraid."

"Oh, dear me," Melchett said insincerely. "Nothing serious, I hope?" Ernest knew that, on the contrary, Melchett couldn't care less if it wiped out the entire family.

In fact, Beryl hadn't come because he hadn't told her there was to be a retirement party. To be more precise, he hadn't even told her he was retiring.

He had left the party early, pleading the family drama as his excuse. He had carried the clock as far as Waterloo, his heart

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lightening with every step. There, he had thrown the bloody thing into a convenient skip.

And that had been that. He had taken a later train than he usually would, but not too late, and had walked up the lane from the station at about half-past seven. As he approached the drive, a red van swept out, slowed when the driver saw him, and then stopped. He recognised the driver as George Putnam.

George wound down the passenger window and leaned across. He had a broad, brown face. Ernest realised with a shock that they must be about the same age, the two of them. Looking at George's competent arms on the wheel, he felt tired and used. That's what thirty-five years in an office gets you, he thought, a grey face and a grey mind. And a body you wouldn't put out for the cat.

George said, "Evening, Mr. Holroyd. Working late tonight, then?" Ernest wished he wouldn't always show so much of those white teeth. Talking to George, he always had the urge to purse his lips.

Ernest said, "You too, George, it seems."

George grinned even wider and pushed a hand through his wiry black hair. "Bit of trouble with your central heating. Really ought to think about getting a new system. Still, she'll see you right for a bit." He waved a goodbye and drove off.

Ernest entered the house to find Beryl in an extremely bad temper after her bridge afternoon. She had been partnered with Jane Kingshott, who was an absolute ninny, had no idea of bidding, and had rattled on during the entire game about her brats of grandchildren.

He sympathised with her somewhat superficially, defrosted and heated two roast beef dinners from the deep freeze, and they ate in the kitchen in silence, listening to the ticking of the oven cooling down. The only subject of conversation had been the work that George was going to do the day after.

"I didn't know George was coming again," Ernest said mildly. "I saw him on my way in and he said he'd fixed the central heating."

"He says there's something funny going on in the water system. Up in the loft, he says," Beryl said waspishly. "*I* don't know. Why do you always have to question everything I say?"

Ernest thought it must have something to do with that mysterious tap under the sink. He had never known what that tap was *for.* He knew what it *did:* when you turned it, it caused an enormous knocking at the top of the house. So George was coming to try to sort that out, he thought. Well, so much the better. But he didn't really see the point. That tap had been causing the same terrific knocking at the top of the house ever since they had moved in here, what, seven years before. Why bother?

In their first days in the house, George had been a find. He was

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a local man. A local character, Ernest had thought with irritation, when first faced with this squat, muscular being, deep brown all over and with no neck.

Standing in front of the fireplace, twisting his cap in his broad hands in an expert way that he must have learnt from his father, his very first words had been, "I know this place. I'll see you right."

To be honest, George *was* a good workman. And most of all, he was quiet. There was none of this banging and whistling and shouting that you expected from workmen. Ernest became quite used to turning some corner or entering one room or another and experiencing a phantom heart attack when he came suddenly on George, kneeling or on a ladder, quietly doing something. And he *had* seen them right. In the process and over the years, he had also seen a large number of Ernest's cheques.

Beryl thought he was a treasure. But then, Beryl would. Beryl thought anyone was a treasure if they made her life a little easier. And if they didn't interfere with her plans. If she was *capable* of planning beyond the next bridge game. He wondered sometimes what, if anything, went on inside that head. He also wondered, looking across the table at the plump face which had fallen into its habitual lines of discontent, just who he had been when he married her, and who he had thought *she* was.

Putting out the lights and closing down the house before going to bed, he had thought, well, that's it. I'm retired. I'm rid of them all.

But he didn't really *feel* retired until this first morning when he was sitting in his armchair for the first time, in the quiet, the absolute quiet and freedom of his cellar, his retirement home. He looked round and marvelled at it. He had never been what you might call a do-it-yourself man. He had never really needed to be. After all, he had always had George to sort out the problems.

But this he had done all by himself.

The large house in Wimbledon that they had bought seven years before had been, like most things, Beryl's idea. It was, Ernest realised, a celebration of his elevation to the hierarchy. And Beryl's, come to that. Beryl had insisted, when he was appointed to the board, that they should have a house commensurate with his status as a director. Ernest protested mildly that personnel director was hardly the hierarchy, but her will prevailed in this, as in most things. So, they had moved out of the really very comfortable flat in Fulham to the large double-fronted house in a tree-lined avenue in Wimbledon.

He had been forced to agree that he found the area very pleasant. It was quiet and well behaved, the house had lots of rooms and a large garden. He had resisted at first, but even by that time he had realised that there was no point. Beryl would have her

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way. She had produced all the arguments. He was a director, he had to have a director's house, somewhere they could entertain. In fact, they had never entertained, even in Fulham. But Beryl conveniently ignored that. And after they moved to Wimbledon, they had gone on not entertaining.

The other thing he had to admit was that the house was large, there was lots of room: room enough for them both to live their lives as far away from each other as possible. So life had settled down.

And if the house was too large for them to maintain, there was always George, with his muscular arms and multitude of talents, to move quietly around repairing, building, and generally doing whatever was needed.

It was surprising that Ernest had not explored the cellar properly before he did. It had been described by the estate agent, who had quickly flipped open the door and just as quickly flipped it shut, as an imposingly useful storage space.

For six years the cellar had simply served him as just that: an enormous dump for all the unrequired rubbish that any household seems to accumulate almost by osmosis. It was filled with old suitcases, trunks, tea chests full of old books, piles of magazines, bin bags full of old clothes, two armchairs and a dressing table that had become surplus to requirements, and a whole pile of things that Ernest couldn't even remember acquiring. There was another heap of things that he could remember acquiring but couldn't for the life of him remember *why*. And at the far end was the vast antique boiler which had become redundant when the previous owners had installed the modern system that now throbbed more or less efficiently in the utility room next to the kitchen. Some half-hearted attempts had been made to dismantle the old boiler, or at least the casing that had enclosed it: Some ancient tubing together with two great sheets of discoloured, rusty iron plate with rivet holes leaned against the wall as if exhausted. He kept meaning to do something about the boiler one of these days. Talk to George about it, perhaps.

Ernest also used the cellar for his wine. He had measured the temperature carefully and come to the conclusion that it was cool but not cold and that the temperature was stable. And there were already wine racks along the left-hand wall, presumably, *hopefully,* installed after the demise of the old boiler.

But it was only twelve months earlier that Ernest had discovered the cellar's real secret. He had been to a wine auction at Bonham's and had picked up some cases of Meursault, a couple of Château Lynch Bages, and three more of Romanée-Conti which he liked very much indeed. He had spent rather more than he intended to and he was very pleased with himself.

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Hauling them down to the cellar, he decided on a spot in which to completely rearrange the wine racks. The far end of the cellar was really quite dark; he could hardly see to read the labels. He wanted to arrange the racks in ranks so that he could see them all with greater ease. So, bringing down one of George's working lights, he began at the far end, emptying the rack with care, transferring the bottles to lie on some old sacks he found in a corner. Then he noticed something. Although behind the other racks the wall was plain brickwork, on the other side of this particular one there was wood. He finished emptying the rack and then pulled it awkwardly away from the wall. There it was, as he suspected—a door. There was a key in the lock and he had no great trouble in unlocking it and pushing it open.

He went through the door and found himself in another cellar, almost as large as the main one. He found a switch beside the door and the single light bulb in the centre of the ceiling sprang into half-hearted life. He looked around the room. It was a good size and someone had apparently done a great deal of work on it years before. The brickwork had been re-pointed and the brick floor was level and clean. There were no draughts, but the air was reasonably fresh. He noticed two tiny ventilator bricks right up at the top of one wall; he wondered what the previous owner had intended for this room. He had obviously gone to a lot of trouble to clean it up, and then, for some reason, he had simply closed the door on it.

Ernest did a few calculations and realised that he must be underneath the utility room. That would account for the lack of chill. The famous heating system did its work down here just as efficiently as upstairs. He put the light out, closed and locked the door, and continued sorting out his wine racks. He put them back exactly as they had been. He was careful to add the key to his key ring when he went back upstairs.

The following Saturday, when Beryl had left to go into town in a desperate and expensive search for what she called "something decent to wear" in her size, he went down to the cellar. He had bought four castors, which he managed to fit, not without a struggle, to the base of the wine rack. He loaded the bottles and tried the rack. It pivoted away from the door smoothly, with no trace of unsteadiness. He unlocked and pushed open the door, stepped inside, and pulled the rack towards him. It slid back into place. Perfect.

The very next day he had announced to the managing director that he planned to retire at the end of the current financial year.

It had taken him the whole of that year to get the cellar as he wanted it. Twelve months of smuggling bits of furniture from the upper floors, of struggling down the cellar stairs with rolls of car-

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pet brought in when Beryl was at her bridge. Three hundred days of learning how to run unobtrusive power cables from the main circuits, how to make holes in a door jamb to allow said power cables to enter, how to connect electric lights and fix carpet to a brick floor—and along the way, how to administer basic first aid. It was hard work, and he was sometimes so weary at the weekend that he fell asleep over dinner. He thought often, with a sort of weary hilarity, that George would have been proud of him.

Beryl, of course, hadn't noticed a thing. But then Beryl never noticed anything that concerned him. Once it had become clear, years before, that Ernest would never be the company chairman, or even, like her father, a managing director, her face had set into its soon-to-be-permanent mask of dissatisfaction, her eyes had narrowed, and she had begun to put on the first of what turned out to be a lot of weight. She had given up on him and thereafter concentrated on her life, which involved shopping, bridge, a variety of undemanding but visible charity works, more bridge, and some casual and reluctant housework when Mrs. Delaney wasn't available.

Ernest was a rather irritating someone who went out in the morning, then came back at night, and she didn't pay the slightest attention to anything he did. So he was able to work on his project without interruption and without too much dodging about.

And at last, after a long year, it was done. What he had was a comfortable, draught-free bed-sitting-room, with agreeable lighting, and a couple of comfortable chairs *(Why two?* he had asked himself. *There's only me.* But two seemed more companionable and so two it was). He had many, many books, all the books he had always meant to read but had never found the time to even open. He had a record player, a drinks cabinet and a small wine rack, and a camp bed in case he felt like a nap. He had an electric barfire, a small hot plate and kettle, and a storage cupboard. All furnished from secret shopping expeditions and raids on the house. He had no television. To be honest, he had lost the habit. Beryl didn't like television, and discouraged its use. When their first, last, and only Philips set had given up the ghost five years before, it had never been replaced.

For a long time he had been a little worried about possible sounds drifting up into the house, but then, on one of his expeditions he had seen for sale some curious foam rubber that looked rather like grey egg-boxes. It was intended for soundproofing studios, and he bought lots of it to fix to the walls and ceiling with a contact adhesive. When he first tried *The Mikado* on the record player, the soundproofing gave a rather curious effect. He couldn't decide what was wrong until he realised. There was no echo.

He had an anechoic retirement home and it pleased him a lot.

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This first day was a pure delight. He kicked off his shoes, read from a volume of Sherlock Holmes stories, made drinks exactly when he liked; he even smoked a small cigar, although that had made the air a little hazy. For a lot of the time he sat in his armchair and dreamed of the years he had wasted doing work that didn't amount to anything, alongside people he had hated, and constructing a life that didn't amount to anything shared by a woman with whom he now had nothing in common except their mutual dislike. But, despite the momentary sadness that this brought him, the day was wonderful. Even the can of beans and sausages he heated on the hot plate tasted exquisite. He had rather daringly opened a bottle of St. Estèphe to go with it and found that they went surprisingly well together. And he took a short nap afterwards.

He heard nothing from the house above him, even though Mrs. Delaney must have come in to *do* as usual, George was apparently coming in to work on that tap, and Beryl must certainly have clacked around the house for hours doing nothing.

At the end of the wonderful day, he regretfully put on his hat and coat and picked up his briefcase. He entered the main cellar, pulled the door to, closed the wine-rack door, and tiptoed up the cellar steps, listening carefully for sounds from the kitchen. But he knew that Beryl was certainly still at her bridge. He entered the kitchen, took off his coat, and when Beryl did come home, was defrosting lamb cutlets.

He gave a completely fictional account of his day to a totally uninterested Beryl, washed up, and went to bed early. Sleep refused to come, and he realised dimly that this might be due to lack of exercise. Lying about in the cellar all day clearly wasn't going to be enough to tire him out. He wondered if he could get one of those exercise bikes into the house without anyone seeing. He would have to give that some thought.

His life settled now into a pattern which was just as regular as what he thought of as his *old* life. He would eat his breakfast as usual in the kitchen, call out, "I'm off, then," and slam the kitchen door. Then he went *down there* for the rest of the day.

He had charted Mrs. Delaney's movements very particularly, since her timekeeping was notoriously rocky, and, in fact, she gave him a nasty surprise one day by noisily unlocking the kitchen door just as he was going down the cellar steps. That had been a close one. After that, he was very careful to keep an eye on the drive while eating his breakfast, just in case.

What amazed him was the sense of freedom he experienced once he had locked the door behind him. Bizarre, really, he thought,

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given that he was living the life of a mole. Perhaps it was the idea that absolutely no one knew where he was. Beryl thought he was safely out of the way at the office, the office thought he was enjoying his well-deserved retirement, fishing or golfing or something, and so everyone was happy. And he was free of them all for the first time in his life. Free of the idiots and villains at the office, and free of Beryl. He thought with a shudder about what retirement might have been like if he had been anchored in the house—he thought of it now as "up there." Entire days spent with Beryl. It didn't bear thinking about. One day, he realised with a tick of anxiety, he would *really* have to announce his retirement, but that was ten years away and anything could happen. Absolutely anything. He wondered what that anything might be. He was getting a taste of life without Beryl and he liked it. What would it be like, he asked himself, if she wasn't there at all? He decided that he was going to have to give that some very careful thought.

One night, two months later, Beryl announced over dinner her intention of going to spend the following Saturday night, and perhaps Sunday, with her sister.

"That rat of a husband of hers is acting up again," she said. "I never trusted that man. I told her she was a fool to marry him, but she was always like that. Always knew better. And now look."

Ernest thought of Trevor, his inoffensive brother-in-law. He had always rather liked Trevor, with whom he had felt a strong sense of solidarity. Beryl's sister was, if anything, a little worse than Beryl.

"I'm taking the car. Mrs. Delaney can come in the evening and make something for your dinner. Or you could eat out." *Do what you like,* her tone said. *I couldn't care less.*

Ernest suddenly felt a leap of excitement. He would, he decided immediately, spend the night *down there.* Just to see what it was like. He had to restrain himself severely from showing too much enthusiasm.

That week was an ache for him. He could hardly wait for the weekend to come. He realised with rather bitter amusement that this was exactly the way he had felt when he was a Scout, waiting for summer camp to come around. And he also realised that it was exactly that long ago that he had last experienced this feeling of bubbling anticipation.

Saturday came, and Beryl left in the Volvo. Ernest actually stood and waved her off, he couldn't understand why. George, who had been doing more arcane work on the vast array of piping the house boasted, left at the same time. He winked at Ernest.

"On your own for the weekend, then?"

Ernest smiled. "That's right."

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"Well, don't do anything I wouldn't do. Mind you, that gives you room to work." And he climbed into his red van and was off down the drive like a rocket.

For a long time, strangely, Ernest couldn't settle. He wandered round the house, moving aimlessly from room to room, picking things up and putting them down, turning on the radio and then turning it off again. He made himself some lunch, an unspectacular omelette with some tomatoes. Then he realised what was the matter with him. He simply wasn't used to being alone *up here.*

He locked all the doors, checked all the windows, adjusted the central heating, and took an extra blanket from the linen cupboard. He also went to the lavatory. That, annoyingly, was the only thing he lacked down there. Then he went *down there.*

He spent a very pleasant afternoon and evening reading and listening to *Patience* on the record player. He drank a bottle of wine and ate half a Camembert he had brought down with him and was agreeably surprised when he looked at his watch. It was already half-past eleven.

He had wondered—a little apprehensively—what it would be like actually going to sleep down here in the dark and the silence. In fact, it was very cosy indeed. The only difference was that he was in absolute and complete darkness. The silence, however, he was surprised to find, was not absolute. Despite his soundproofing, he could still faintly hear—or sense—the tiny vibrations of the old house settling down above him for the night. When he first switched off the light he had the extremely strange feeling of floating—he supposed it must be a kind of sensory-deprivation effect. He waved his arm and watched the luminous hands of his watch dance in front of him, far brighter than he had ever seen them.

He slept very well on his camp bed. In the small hours he woke up for no reason at all, to hear a very faint, intermittent squeaking, and realised that there were mice in the main cellar. It was hardly surprising, he thought, and that was another thing to talk to George about. He smiled to himself in the darkness. Just him and the mice. Everyone in his little hole.

When he finally woke up quite naturally at eight o'clock, he felt refreshed and rested. He switched the light on and sat on the edge of the bed. He would have to find some way to do this more often. He got up and scratched himself thoroughly because there was no one there to tell him not to. Then he stretched luxuriously, dressed quickly and efficiently, and tidied his bed. He unlocked the door and pulled it open.

For a moment he thought confusedly that something must have fallen over in the main cellar. Instead of the wine rack, which should be in front of him, he saw only patchy blackness. He had to

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refocus his eyes deliberately in order to see that what was actually in the doorway was a large plate of iron, discoloured and rusty.

He pushed it, gently at first, then putting his shoulder into it, still believing that this massive piece of metal had somehow fallen across the doorway and that it would only take a good heave to get rid of it. Then he banged it with his fist. All he heard was the sound of flesh hitting quarter-inch metal with a definite and deeply depressing lack of resonance. There was evidently a lot of deadening bulk on the other side.

Later, despite the situation, he had to marvel at how it had been done so quietly. But then, George knew this house like the back of his hand and had always been a quiet worker. Not mice squeaking, he thought, not mice but *screws*. Huge screws being slowly forced home into protesting wood by big, brown hands. No, he corrected himself again, not screws, either: coach-bolts, if he knew George.

After two or three hours of useless struggle, he finally sat in his armchair, vaguely opening a bottle of Meursault, and wondered if Beryl was *up there* with George. He decided that probably the answer was yes. Come to think of it, she had probably been handing George his screwdrivers, or his brace and bit, or whatever it was, while he was working last night. He thought, as he was drinking his wine, that George was going to have to watch his step. It clearly didn't do to underestimate her, or her ability to make her *own* plans.

A little later the lights flickered once, and then went out for good.

Some time after that—he didn't know whether it was hours or days—he said quite suddenly and aloud, "No one knows I am here."

There was no echo. ●

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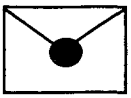

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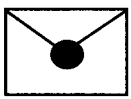

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Art by Gary Gray

NIGHT SHIFT

by Michael Z. Lewin

"All right," Powder said as he closed the shift's announcement book, "now get out there and be *good* cops."

The second half of Night Shift pushed its chairs back and began to rise. As they did, many spoke to their neighbors. Powder heard more of what was said than they thought, including, "So only he gets to be the 'bad' cop?"

"He" smiled. To the room in general and no one in particular he said, "God, I hate the noise those chairs make when they scrape across the floor. It makes me think of dentists. You guys ought to have better equipment, including better chairs."

"We're not all 'guys,'" Kaneesha Williams said. "In case you hadn't noticed, Lieutenant."

"The word is used generically these days, in case *you* hadn't noticed, Allopetia," Powder said. Although it was wrong to say that Powder hadn't noticed that the shift was not all "guys" in the old way the word was used. He had noticed Williams in particular. She worked hard. He liked her.

She, however, didn't like his comment. He could see it in her face.

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Well, tough titty.

From the right side of his desk someone said, "Maybe what we need is a better floor." This was Kirsh, one of the fast-track kids.

"Yeah, deep-pile carpet," Kirsh's fast-track buddy said. "To go with recliners."

Powder frowned as he tried to remember the buddy's name. He wasn't expected to know, it being only his second night with the shift, but that was all the more reason to. He struggled to fit a name with the face. Damn. He'd do another run through the personnel files before he went out on patrol. Was there time before the rider arrived? Could he make time?

Michael Z. Lewin's police procedurals starring Albert Samson and Leroy Powder have a strong comic element, as you'll see in this new Powder tale. There have been about a dozen novels featuring Samson and/or Powder, and a few years ago Mr. Lewin began another series, set in Bath, England, and involving a family detective agency. As in all his work, the comic and the bizarre take center stage. The latest novel in the Bath series is *Crescent Blues.* †

"Or maybe, Lieutenant, *huch-huch,* maybe you ought to have a better dentist, *huch-huch.*"

The name of the owner of the stupid *huch-huch* laugh Powder did remember. "Stay for a minute, Mitchell."

"What?" Huch-huch Mitchell was tall, young, bulky, and the most recent graduate on the shift from the police academy. He was also not the brightest spark in the campfire.

"Stop moving toward the door," Powder said.

"Sir?"

"Do I have to draw spots for your feet? Or use Super glue? Do not leave the room, Officer. Cease exiting. Got it? *¿Entiendo?"* There was muffled laughter from those of Night Shift who had not yet left for their cars.

"Yes, sir," Mitchell said. The tone of his voice transparently asked, "What have I done wrong?"

Powder shuffled the documents on his desk for a minute while Mitchell's anxiety increased. Then he picked up a sheet of paper and turned to the young man.

"Is there a problem, sir?"

"Do you think there is a problem, Mitchell?"

Mitchell's frown showed plainly that he couldn't think of any problem he wanted to admit to.

"Well?" Powder said.

"I don't know, sir."

"That's good, Mitchell."

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"It is?"

"Never be too certain of yourself."

"Sir?"

"A good cop always questions things. Could I have done that better? Did what I just said mean what I meant it to mean to the person I just said it to?"

A pause. "Sir?"

"Now," Powder said, as he waved the paper in his hand, "do you know what this is?"

"Uh, no."

"It's a waiver."

"Oh."

Not a clue, Powder thought. "For a rider. What would you say if I asked you to take out a rider tonight?"

"A rider?" Mitchell asked. "Tonight? Me?"

"Do you have a problem with that, Officer Mitchell?"

"Uh, well . . ."

"Is your hesitation because it would interfere with collecting bribes from the drug dealers in your sector?"

"I don't take bribes!" the shocked young Mitchell protested.

Mildly, Powder said, "So everything's copacetic then."

"It's what?"

Powder knew a lot of words that began with "cop" but he opted to delay elaboration to another time. The rider was due to arrive at any minute. "You'll be able to cope."

"It's just . . . I never had a rider before, sir."

"But you know about the program."

"People get permission to ride with us on a shift to see how we work."

"As long as they sign away the right to make a claim if something nasty should happen to them." Powder waved the waiver again.

"But . . ." Mitchell began.

"Why you?"

Mitchell nodded.

"Because the chief asked me to pick the best man for the job."

Mitchell frowned, transparently torn between asking about why he was the "best man" and asking about the chief's involvement.

"The new chief and I are like *that,*" Powder said. He wrapped two fingers over each other. "Haven't you heard the rumors?"

"Uh, not that one, sir."

"He's a fine man, Mitchell. Don't let any of the complainers tell you different just because he didn't come up through the ranks. Chief Cody wants nothing more than to make this a better, more effective police department, and anyone dedicated to doing that should be all right by you."

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"Sir."

"In fact, the new chief is setting up a special assignment for me so I can help him."

"Yeah?"

"It's something he thinks only I can do, because nobody in the department likes me."

"Sir?"

"If I have no friends, then I can be impartial. But until the special assignment is worked out, I am filling in by taking charge of roll calls on shifts where the regular officer is away, for whatever reason. Like your Lieutenant Turk."

"Oh."

"For a fine man like the chief, I'll help out wherever I can. And you should, too. Which is why you should be glad to let this foreign visitor ride with you tonight."

"Foreign, sir?"

"Didn't I mention it? Your rider's Japanese."

"Japanese?"

"That means 'from Japan,' Mitchell. Televisions? Cars? The Nobel prizewinner Kawabata?"

"Uh, sure, sir, but I don't . . . Well, I never was much good at languages."

"Pity. I guess we'll just have to make do with the amount of English you already know, then, won't we?"

Powder was looking at personnel-file pictures and testing himself on the names that went with them when there was a knock on the open door behind him. He ignored it. Echiaverra, Carla. The left-handed one. And Flaherty. Tony? Something with a T. Tim. Yes.

"Lieutenant Powder?" The voice was female and unfamiliar.

"One sec," he said with a sigh. He flicked through five more cards and got all the names right. Good. It was always possible that Turk's shoulder wouldn't heal as quickly as she expected and that his assignment to her roll call would last more than just the one week. "Good," he said aloud.

He turned around and found himself facing a small woman with black-rimmed glasses and a dark blue suit. Maybe five feet even, Asian. "Who are you?"

"You are Lieutenant Powder?"

"I know who I am. That wasn't the question."

"I am Reiko Yamaguchi," the woman said with a bow. "I believe that your Chief Cody arranged for me to have a 'ride' with you tonight?"

"I wasn't expecting a woman."

"Oh, so sorry," Reiko Yamaguchi said. "But I am unable to change at so short notice."

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Powder rubbed his face. Was that a joke? "Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Yamaguchi. *Hajimemashite. Dozo yoroshiku.*"

Reiko Yamaguchi's face burst into a beautiful smile. "You speak Japanese!" she said, but in English.

"Only a few words."

"Have you been to Japan?"

"No. What I know is from a book."

"A book! But that is wonderful and so surprising to me."

"Why? Don't policemen in Japan know how to read?"

Reiko Yamaguchi was momentarily silenced. Then she said, "To tell the truth, Lieutenant, my knowledge of your police comes from the movie pictures in which the policemen and women do not have such cosmopolitan interests."

She didn't know anything about American police? Why was she here? "Are you a cop in Japan?"

"Me?" The smile again. "No, no."

"So why are you here?"

"I am a writer, Lieutenant Powder. I am here at invitation from your mayor, who hopes to promote tourism and investment from Japan to Indianapolis with the article I will write in my magazine."

Powder rubbed his face again.

"Lieutenant? I have not made myself clear? I am sorry. My English is so poor."

"Your English is excellent, Ms. Yamaguchi. Very impressive."

"Oh, thank you so much."

"But I don't understand how riding on Night Shift could promote tourism and investment."

"It is because," Reiko Yamaguchi said, "our Japanese tourists and businessmen also watch the movie pictures."

"So?"

"And what they see is American cities full of shooting and beating and robbery and explosion and police who do not obey their own rules."

"I don't go to the movies much myself," Powder said.

"The reason I ride with you tonight is to make it so I can write it from real experience—and not from public relation—that your city is safe and not like the movie picture."

"Or that it isn't safe."

"Or that it isn't safe. Exactly!" The smile. The smile almost made Powder regret having decided to send Ms. Yamaguchi out with Mitchell. Almost.

Mitchell's face when he saw that his rider was to be not only foreign but female would have been worth a TV crew. Why aren't the media ever there when you need them?

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Ms. Yamaguchi didn't look much happier. "I am not to ride with you, Lieutenant Powder?"

"The ride request that came through to me said you were to ride with Lieutenant Turk." He understood why it had come here now—that this *female* foreigner would ride with the *female* Lieutenant Turk. Pity Turk got her arm nearly torn off. Ah well, stuff happens.

"But," Ms. Yamaguchi said, "do you not replace Lieutenant Turk? I do not understand."

"I do not work regularly on this quadrant, so I don't know the area well. And, I have documents to work on that will delay my getting out on patrol. So I selected Officer Mitchell for you to ride with. He is regularly assigned here, and he is our newest graduate from the academy, which means that all the correct policing procedures will still be fresh in his mind."

"I see," Ms. Yamaguchi said. And it was clear from her eyes that she understood full well that she was being fobbed off.

Smart as well as the beautiful smile. Powder was in danger of falling in love.

"Mitchell?" Powder said.

"Sir?"

"I want you to answer any question Ms. Yamaguchi asks you, as truthfully as you can. Any question whatsoever, no matter how embarrassing to the force. And I want you to take her wherever she wants to go. If she wants to see drug dealers, show her drug dealers. The same for gangs, transvestite hookers, whatever. Hide nothing. Do you understand?"

"But I don't know where—"

"Anything she asks for. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir."

Powder turned for a moment to Ms. Yamaguchi. "Okay?"

"Thank you, Lieutenant Powder." But no smile.

"Once I'm on the road myself, I'll come and find you. Meanwhile, Mitchell, if there's anything you're uncertain about, radio me."

Powder waved the odd couple off to the parking lot and then he returned to the personnel cards' pictures. He sailed through those that remained, which pleased him.

He considered going through the cards once again, but it would be better to go out and see if he could match some names to real faces.

As a replacement roll-call lieutenant, no one would have complained if he'd just hung around the station, going out only if there was an important "run," a shooting, say, or a robbery. But it wasn't Powder's style to dog a job. It had been a long time since he'd gotten access to patrolling officers, and they were, after all, the core of

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policing. If during his stay on Northside Night Shift he could make even one officer do the job *better,* then Powder would take away some satisfaction from this marking-time assignment.

Besides, Turk—the lieutenant he was pinch-hitting for—was a more-rather-than-less performer herself, a ground-troops lieutenant with a reputation for trying hard to help her less experienced soldiers. Like Huch-huch Mitchell. Who struck Powder as likely to have difficulty functioning competently and confidently even when he didn't have a rider in the seat beside him scrutinizing his every move and word.

"I'm going out now, Becky," Powder told the civilian who ran the office side of the station.

"Fine," she said, without looking up.

He handed her a sheet of paper.

"What's this?"

"Tonight's message for the chief."

"Haven't you gotten your meeting with him yet?"

"How can I if you never send through my requests?"

She leaned back. "I send all your requests through."

"You better. I'm going to check this one. Bye now."

Powder headed for the parking lot and his own patrol car, thinking, No smile?

Powder found Mitchell and Ms. Yamaguchi in an apartment in an attractive block on Washington Boulevard. The run had been to an architect who returned from an evening out to find that he'd been burgled.

"This is Mr. Briggs, sir," Mitchell said. "He's been burgled. TV, VCR, hi-fi."

Is life all alphabet these days? Powder wondered. "And PC?" he asked.

"No," Briggs said. He was about forty and wore a well-cut three-piece suit comfortably. "*Fortunately,* I left that at the office. *But,* the scumbag did take my food processor."

"Your food processor?"

"It was top-of-the-range, and a gift. And worst of all, the *very* worst of all, he took my briefcase."

"And what was in the briefcase?"

"Nothing of value to anyone, except me. Well, there was a cell phone and a solar calculator. But those are nothing compared to the drawings and the notes, which represent absolute hours of work and are of no earthly use whatsoever to anyone but me. It's heartbreaking."

"Drawings?" Powder asked.

"I'm an architect," Briggs said. "I don't know *what* I am going to do."

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"Mitchell?"

"Sir?"

"What are *you* going to do?"

"Well, next—"

"Don't tell me, son. Just do it."

"Sir," Mitchell said with a nod. "When you feel you're able, Mr. Briggs, I need you to continue going through the apartment to see if anything else is missing."

"I don't know if I can *bear* to look in the bedroom."

"Can I get you something?" Mitchell asked. "A drink of water?"

Briggs pulled himself together and stood erect. "If you looked in the fridge, you'd probably find that he stole the Perrier. I'm ready, Officer. Let's check the other rooms."

As Mitchell followed the architect down a hallway, Powder turned to Ms. Yamaguchi. "How has your ride been so far?"

But before she answered, Powder saw that her eyes—frosty at the end of their last meeting—were now shining and bright. "It is so unexpected," she said. "That I should be standing inside the home of a complete stranger who has not questioned who I am or why I am here."

"You are with a uniformed police officer. That validates you."

"I understand, but still it is amazing for me."

"Just don't steal anything, all right?"

A look of horror passed over Ms. Yamaguchi's face. "I would never conceive to do such a thing."

"I didn't mean to suggest that you would," Powder said. "It was a joke."

Ms. Yamaguchi gave a slight bow. "Of course. But a joke was so unexpected in this context."

"And from me?"

"I am sure that you are very humorous," Ms. Yamaguchi said. "But humor, especially the humor of my region in Japan, depends so much on familiarity with the situation."

"What is your region?"

"Have you heard of Kobe?"

"I know of the earthquake, and the beef."

Ms. Yamaguchi smiled and bowed. "Also, we are known for humor."

"But not, perhaps, in this situation," Powder said.

"But the poor man, Mr. Briggs. How upset he is. Is such a thing to happen commonplace?"

"I'll have to check, but from reading the recent records I don't remember any other petty burglaries in this neighborhood."

"So that makes you thinking what?"

"That it might be . . . say, a kid in the area who's decided he needs some money to supplement his allowance."

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"And for money he robs a neighbor? How distressing."

"It'll be even more distressing when he tries to sell what he's stolen, unless he knows how."

"But he must be feeling so ashamed of himself."

"Who? The burglar?"

"Yes."

"Ashamed?"

"To commit a theft, from someone else's home, a neighbor."

Briggs and Officer Mitchell returned to the living room as Powder was saying, "Is that what a burglar in Japan would feel? Shame?"

"Of course. To do such a thing is terrible."

"And what would happen if he got caught?"

"Well, it is not the same at all times, but he could be taken to his victim, so that he could apologize for what he had done. And could take a small gift of atonement."

Mitchell said, "Sir, the burglar doesn't seem to have taken anything from the rest of the apartment."

"Thank *God,"* Briggs said.

Powder said, "Ms. Yamaguchi thinks that in Japan your burglar would be feeling ashamed of himself about now. What do you think about your burglar in Indianapolis, Mr. Briggs?"

"I think he would be feeling a baseball bat if I caught up with him. It's such . . . such an invasion!"

"So you don't think he's feeling ashamed? Or that he's likely to come back here and apologize for what he's done and bring you a gift of atonement?"

"What are you talking about?" Briggs said. He looked at Mitchell.

Who said, "Sir?"

"Well, I think we should ask him," Powder said.

"What?" Briggs said.

"It's the only way we'll find out."

"You know who the little scrotum is?"

"Mr. Briggs, may I use your phone?"

"Of course you can use my phone. It's over there."

"Thank you. And now, may I have the number of your cellular phone?"

Of course it was a bit of luck that the thief actually answered the cell phone when it rang. But once he did . . .

"Hi," Powder said in his friendliest tone. "Am I speaking to the person who stole this phone earlier this evening from an apartment on Washington Boulevard?"

There was a pause.

Powder said, "Gee, I hope I am, because one of the things you

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took tonight was a briefcase with some papers in it. The papers aren't worth anything to you, but if I could get them back it'd sure help me out of a jam at work."

"I . . . don't have your briefcase." The voice was young and pathetic.

"But if, maybe, you threw it somewhere, then I could get the papers back. It'd sure save my ass, and maybe even my job."

There was another pause.

Powder said, "Hey, I need those papers real bad. If you tell me where you left them I promise I won't call the cops or anything."

"The briefcase, it's in the trash can outside the drugstore at . . . at Forty-ninth and Penn."

"Oh, thank you," Powder said. "I really do appreciate it."

"Uh, okay."

"And, while you're on the phone, I've got someone here who'd like to know whether you feel any shame about what you did tonight?"

A silence.

"And do you think it's likely that you'll come back to my apartment to apologize, and to bring me a present of atonement?"

The line went dead.

Powder turned to Ms. Yamaguchi and shook his head. "No shame. No atonement. Life's a bitch, ain't it? I blame society."

"The briefcase?" Briggs said. "My briefcase?"

However, Powder addressed Huch-huch Mitchell. "Officer, the said briefcase is said to be in a trash can outside the drugstore at Forty-ninth and Penn."

"Got it."

Powder waved a finger. "But make sure you preserve any fingerprints on it. If there's any chance we can identify Mr. Briggs's scrotum, or log some evidence to use against him in the future, we want to do it."

"Yes, sir."

"You're getting my briefcase back?" Briggs said. "And my drawings?"

"Sounds like," Powder said.

"Why, that's *wonderful!* I swear I'll never say a bad word about the police again for the rest of my life."

"You see, Mitchell," Powder said, "do a good job for the public and there's no limit to the gratitude they'll lavish on you."

"So now," Briggs said, "do you think that you'll be able to get me back my TV and VCR and food processor?"

Powder met and left Huch-huch and his rider several times during the night. Ms. Yamaguchi was privileged to share many adventures. She was present when the K-9 people used a dog to flush

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out a homeless man in a warehouse. She was at Mitchell's side when he stopped a woman for a traffic offense and then identified her as a bail absconder, using the in-car computer. She was there when officers heard gunshots fired in the distance as they were chatting at the scene of a traffic accident. And she watched as a teenage girl, reported missing, was found waiting at a bus stop on 34th Street.

Only one incident reflected badly on Mitchell. Near the end of the shift, Powder received a radio message from a Lieutenant Lane urgently requesting that they meet in the parking lot of a Village Pantry on 38th Street.

Lane turned out to be in an unmarked car. Powder didn't know him, but he wasn't given time to get acquainted and bond. Lane rolled down his window and said, "One of your patrol cars is about to screw up an undercover narcotics operation that took six months to set up."

"Yeah? How?"

"The jerk-off is driving up and down the streets and alleys south of Fall Creek. He's got a civilian in the car, and maybe he's trying to get her to ID someone, but it's a bad time for him to be doing that—do you get me? Whatever he's up to, pull him off it."

Powder twitched a finger in Lane's direction. "I don't have any jerk-offs on my roll call."

"No?" Lane said. "Well, if he looks like a jerk-off and acts like a jerk-off and drives like a jerk-off, that's a jerk-off in my book. And if you don't pull him out of there now, him and the lady could very well find themselves in the middle of something very nasty."

"I will pull him out, since you guys can't keep your situations under control," Powder said, starting his engine, "but get this straight, Lane. If you ever want something from me again, calling members of my roll call names is unacceptable. And next time you better remember to say please."

As Powder roared away, he reached for his radio to ask Mitchell where he was.

"Twenty-third and Alabama, Lieutenant. I've been showing Reiko the customized cars the drug dealers have."

"That's well and good, but take her up to Fifty-eighth and Guilford now. There was a robbery reported there awhile ago and I think that might turn out to be interesting."

"Yes, sir."

So, it was "Reiko" now, was it?

Given the hour—nearly 4 A. M.—Reiko looked very bright when she and Mitchell arrived at 58th and Guilford. "Have you enjoyed your ride?" Powder asked her.

The beautiful smile broke loose almost instantly. "Oh yes, very,

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very much, Lieutenant Powder. But . . ." She turned to the tavern they were outside. ". . . what have we here?"

"Let's find out." He led her to two officers who were talking in front of the tavern window. "Horgan," Powder said, greeting one officer. "Krezewski," the other. Score two for his time with the personnel files. "What have we here?"

Krezewski said, "It's a high-incidence premises, Lieutenant."

"This is the fifth break-in in about twelve months," Horgan said. "It's on my list for special attention, which is why I spotted it."

"What did you spot?"

"Broken window, sir."

Powder looked at the large intact window they were standing by and frowned. "What broken window?"

"It was broken when I got here," Horgan said. "But because of the history at this address, the owner's details are on file. I called him and he sent over an emergency glazier rather than leave the premises unsecured for the rest of the night. I wish I could get a window replaced so quick when my kid breaks one."

"So why are you and Krezewski still here?"

"The glazier's only just gone," Horgan said.

"I happened to be in the vicinity when the call came through, Lieutenant," Krezewski said. "I checked that the back of the tavern is secure, which it is—a solid door and two small windows with heavy wire mesh."

"And the owner?" Powder said.

"A Freddy Franklyn," Horgan said. "He said he'd check out what's missing in the morning."

"I see," Powder said. He was not happy. He heard a car and glanced behind him to see Kaneesha Williams pull up. "And what about you, Mitchell?"

"Uh, what about me, sir?"

"How do you think our guys did? Well?"

"Uh, I guess so. Yeah. Especially getting the window fixed and the premises secured again."

As Kaneesha Williams joined the group she said, "Hey. What's happening?"

Powder said. "Your timing's perfect."

"It is?"

"I got a little test for you."

"Oh yeah? What kind of little test?"

"Basically, to see how good a cop you are."

Williams looked from Horgan to Krezewski to Mitchell, her face asking someone to explain what was going on. The three men stood impassive.

"I said 'basically,' which means it's about basics," Powder said. "So it can't be hard, right?"

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Having gained no support from her fellow officers, Williams turned her eyes to Reiko Yamaguchi.

"How do you do?" Ms. Yamaguchi said with a bow.

"I couldn't have put it better myself," Powder said. "How do you do . . . it?"

"Do what?" Kaneesha Williams asked.

Powder went through the chain of events as they had been reported to him.

"Okay," Williams said. "So what's the question?"

"The question is, how do you do it from here? What's next? If you were in charge."

"You been giving this test to everybody?"

"They tested themselves," Powder said, "and they all failed."

There were sounds of protest from Horgan and Krezewski, but Powder waved them away. "What's next, Kaneesha?" he said. "Help these guys become better cops."

"The guys all failed, huh?" Williams set herself to the task with a smile. "Well, I'd be glad to help, Lieutenant. Just give me a minute here to check this out."

"Exactly!" Powder said.

"What?"

"What'd she say?" Krezewski asked.

"She said, and I quote, 'check—this—out.'"

"I don't get it," Horgan said.

"Let me make it simple for you," Powder said. "Which of you guys went inside?"

"Inside?" Horgan said. He looked at the tavern.

"To check it out," Powder said. "For all you know, your burglar's still in there."

Horgan and Krezewski turned to look at the tavern front again. "But," Krezewski said, "now that the window's fixed, how are we supposed to get in?"

"I think it may be time for you to call the owner back and get some keys, don't you? Unless you'd rather wait till the burglar decides to break out again, though I wouldn't want to be around when you explain to the owner why he has two glazier's bills for the one window." Powder turned to the women. "Well done, Ms. Yamaguchi. And well done, guy."

Back in the station, as Powder readied himself to go home at the end of the shift, he was joined by Reiko Yamaguchi. "I wondered if I was going to see you again," he said.

"I wish to apologize for my rudeness, Lieutenant."

"What rudeness?"

"I was displeased when you sent me out with Norman. Excuse,

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with Officer Mitchell. But now I am pleased that you did so, and I should never have doubted your judgement. It was discourteous."

"Apology accepted," Powder said. "One of the things I admire about your country is that it's a place where courtesy matters."

"Yes, for us courtesy is important."

"And tell me, did you find Indianapolis to be safe?"

"Yes, very safe, in the hands of you and your fine officers. To retrieve the stolen briefcase, and to retrieve the criminal from inside the tavern, that was most impressive."

A pathetic little burglar cowering in a corner, Powder thought. Who was nearly as pathetic as a bar owner who's burgled over and over and still doesn't improve his security.

"Yes, most safe," Ms. Yamaguchi said.

"I wonder," Powder said, "if I might I ask you a favor? Something that might help Indianapolis to become even more safe."

"A favor? Yes, of course," Ms. Yamaguchi said with a bow. "It would be my pleasure."

"Will you be seeing the mayor again?"

"Why, yes. The appointment is this afternoon, and it will be my happy job to tell how very well was the result of my ride."

"Well, the favor is to tell him that I treated you badly."

"Tell him . . . what?" Reiko Yamaguchi seemed stunned. "I must not have understood properly. My English is so poor."

"Please tell the mayor that he must order the chief of police to see me himself, about my rudeness to you."

"But you were not rude. Not at all."

"It would be a great favor to me if you say that I was," Powder said.

"Truly, you *wish* me to say such a bad thing?"

"Yes," Powder said. "And to say that you won't write nice things about Indianapolis until the chief has talked to me himself."

"But I find this so hard to understand."

"You must trust me about that."

"If it is truly a favor to you . . ." Ms. Yamaguchi acknowledged her acquiescence to the request with a bow.

Good, Powder thought. This would show the new chief his resourcefulness. Request after request for a meeting had been ignored, but he'd found another way to get a chance to pitch for the special assignment that would let Powder help populate the whole force with better cops.

"Thank you, Ms. Yamaguchi. I hope you have a good journey home and continued good health." ●

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Art by Allen Davis

A Kind of Culling

by Gwen Moffat

"And the barmaid said: 'All life disappears when the killers is in.' Isn't that hilarious?"

"They talk so badly." Edith was not amused. "They get confused with the tenses. What can you expect? Good teachers are at a premium in the far north."

Dolly Carraro stared blankly at her hostess, but Arthur was delighted. "She said that? It's splendid, Doll. The things they come out with."

"She meant the killer whales, dear," Edith persisted. "She was exaggerating, of course," she told Dolly. "Seals are their main prey, whales don't affect the rest of the wildlife."

She stood up, reaching for their plates. Dolly, rising to help clear the table, exchanged a long look with Arthur. Lovers for the past three months, they were united in their exasperated affection for Edith: a wife so literal and blind that Dolly, in an occasional flash of self-destruction, would find herself throwing out wild hints.

"It was what attracted me to the place when I stayed at the pub that first night," she told Edith in the kitchen. "The romance of it:

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that weird barmaid, savage animals in the loch—violence under a veneer of civilisation."

"You talk like Arthur." Edith was taking a mould from the fridge. "You think savagery's romantic?"

Dolly suppressed a sigh. "With that kind of introduction I knew there was no way I was going to be bored here."

"Oh, never that!"

The contents of the mould emerged without a flaw: creamy and mouth-watering.

"Gorgeous," Dolly enthused. She loved her food. "What is it?"

"Tipsy cake. You'll be drunk. You'll need to watch yourself." Edith was fussing with angelica and maraschino cherries.

"If I didn't know you, I'd think you were getting at me," Dolly said.

"There." Edith stood back, approving her concoction, a plump, flushed matron: middle-class, middle-income, your archetypical homemaker. She said absently, "No, dear, I'm not getting at you—as if I could. You're too big." She smiled her gentle smile. "Not physically, of course; I mean, you have presence." She paused. "Patrician, as Arthur might say."

If Dolly had been a horse she would have backed up with flattened ears. "Silly me," Edith went on, handing the younger woman a jug of cream. "It's your background. It shows, you know."

"My husband was only a papal count," Dolly said stiffly.

"I do admire people with confidence." Edith preceded the other to the dining room. "Like career soldiers"—she eyed her husband fondly—"and aristocrats riding high." She beamed at them like a child. "Out of my league," she confessed.

Dolly gaped. "What's got into you, Edith?" It was impossible that she could have guessed, they were always so careful; he had never come to her rented cottage, she had never come here when he was alone. They were meticulous about making eye contact when in company, virtually ignoring each other. They met where they were certain they would not be seen. Edith *couldn't* know.

"You do everything that I can't," Arthur told his wife. "And everything I don't. For instance, you can't hold your liquor. Look at you: two sherries and a glass of claret and you're maudlin." He

A writer with a spirit of adventure, Gwen Moffat was a despatch rider, Army deserter, artists' model, deckhand on a schooner, rancher, mountain guide, and author of four volumes of autobiography before she found her niche as a crime novelist. It is a niche she fits perfectly. Said the *Mail* (Britain): "Gwen Moffat creates vivid characters, and . . . shows an aptitude for brilliant atmospheric set-pieces."

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was smiling warmly. "What can you do? You produce delicious vegetables from sour soil and you cook like an angel. As for me, I was a good soldier, of a sort, and Dolly there: She's a woman with no fear of vertical snow. We're all experts of a kind."

"I *had* no fear," Dolly corrected, trying to follow his lead.

"I always wondered why you retired," Edith said, serving the tipsy cake. "No one could beat you at downhill racing, no one did beat you. What made you stop?"

Dolly shrugged. "There was nowhere to go. I'd reached the top and I was too old to start something else, like eventing or steeplechasing."

"Why too old?" Arthur was intrigued. "You're a horsewoman. You hunt, so you're not afraid of big jumps."

"If you want to get to the top in anything, you have to start young. I've learned prudence."

"Really?" Edith was surprised. "I'd have thought you were afraid of nothing."

"You're being fulsome," Dolly said.

Edith ignored this. "And why go for the top? Why not enjoy what you have instead of fighting to acquire something you can't have?"

Dolly blinked. "I like challenges." She hesitated and her words hung in the air. She dug a deeper hole. "Without challenges, you stagnate." She stared defiantly at the older woman.

"I'm happy," Edith said.

No one looked at Arthur. He said heavily, "We've found our niche," and then, with an abrupt change of tone: "Is that the blackbirds scolding? I'd better go and see if the weasel's after a nest."

He went out through the French doors and down the flagged path between its rainbow banks of lupine. Edith nodded. "He's right," she said. "This is where he belongs."

Dolly was uneasy, schooling her expression. Our lives revolve round him, she thought: me—crazy for him; Edith with her slavish devotion, totally absorbed in making a home for a man whose pension provided the means to maintain a comfortable house at the back of beyond. The nearest hairdresser was sixty miles away, trained domestic help was nonexistent, gourmet products came by mail. One might expect that a man who'd spent his working years involved in wars of one kind or another would relish the peace of a Highland glen, but Arthur had thrived on danger. He'd told her that recently he had found himself asking the question: Is this all there is? And then, after a regimental reunion in Edinburgh, he had wandered into the hotel bar and there was Dolly Carraro, recently divorced and, on the brink of middle age, avid for distraction. It was a volatile combination: the former SAS officer and the downhill racer. Neither had been in love before, not in this way: overwhelmed by a passion that threatened to engulf all thought

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and behaviour. They were aware of the madness of it, and there was indeed a feeling that it couldn't last, but the effect of that was only to make their meetings more frenetic.

Dolly discovered a vein of cunning. She rented a cottage near her lover, but both were adamant that they must be discreet, in no way must they cause Edith any distress, revelation of the affair would be fatal.

Dolly rationalised continually, maintaining that there was nothing singular in a jet-setter of mature years renting a cottage in a place where she had no declared interests. Arthur, more circumspect, had remedied that situation by sending her to Inverness to buy a camera and clothes that were suitable for a photographer on holiday in the sticks. With a bit of a jolt, Dolly joined the ranks of those well-heeled eccentrics to whom the locals had become accustomed over the last hundred years.

She had gravitated to the gentry, even though it meant driving over fifty miles for drinks or a meal. She was accepted as much for her own aristocratic connections as for the title of contessa which she no longer had a right to use, but which opened doors, as now, enabling her to meet Arthur in other people's houses—the thin end of a wedge.

Within a short time Edith and Dolly were friends, Dolly slyly treating her divorce like a bereavement, acting bereft. She was taken under the older woman's wing and with only the odd stab of guilt watched and waited, plotting how to be alone with Arthur in this country that appeared so empty but which paranoia warned was bristling with watching eyes.

She became interested in photography, culling information from the manual, dreaming aloud of a darkroom, starting to compose scenery to form a picture. Arthur's hobby was wildlife. Edith, a dedicated gardener who kept the outdoors firmly on the other side of the deer fence, ordered the two of them to combine forces: he to show her dramatic scenery, she to photograph his birds.

They went out to the sea cliffs and made love among the primroses and the sea pinks, observed only by the soft-eyed fulmars drifting past. The sun was hot, the breeze a caress, water whispered in the long sea caves.

He did show her the coastline: the gaunt sea stacks, the seals and seabirds, the huge flowery pits in the cliff top where the bases would fall in eventually because there were caverns underneath, their roofs eroding year by year under the winter's surf. In one of these pits the floor had already collapsed, leaving a funnel, the steep sloping sides a profusion of flowers, the cavern only some forty feet below but from the top a gloomy void.

"Never come here in the dark," he told her. "If you fell in, the only way out is to swim."

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"I can't swim," she said.

He stared in wonder. "There's so much I don't know about you. What else should you tell me?"

She shook her head. "Nothing matters. Only us. Here and now."

He frowned. He was an uncomplicated man. He found her fierce absorption in him disturbing, where he was never bothered by Edith's artless possessiveness. He too had rationalised, telling himself that it was not unusual for a man to love two women, and that no harm was done as long as Edith didn't know, couldn't be hurt. Now, with Dolly coming so close to home, literally and metaphorically, seeing the two women together, their differences so blatant, he realised that the emotion he felt for each was not the same. So did he not love them both, after all? His confusion showed.

Arthur was a car enthusiast, buying and selling, always tinkering. His latest toy was an ancient U. S. Army Jeep which, he boasted, could go anywhere. It had no top and no roll bar and, of course, no seat belts. It was probably illegal, but no one was bothered on this wild coast where the police were more concerned with drug smugglers than with old soldiers' peccadilloes. Until, that is, the Jeep was found below the five-hundred-foot cliffs of Solon Head.

The Jeep lay on its side and would have been submerged at high tide. Of Arthur there was no sign. There was a powerful current off the headland and the body would no doubt be washed up miles away, unless the crabs disposed of it first.

Edith was inconsolable. Dolly was in shock. It transpired that Arthur had left home after breakfast to spend the day on the headland, where he'd discovered a colony of black guillemots. When he hadn't returned by seven, Edith had gone out to the headland in the Volvo. Finding no sign of him, she returned home and, in a state between diffidence and panic, called the local policeman to ask if there had been an accident. Pressed, she took the plunge and made an official report that her husband was missing. The Jeep was spotted next morning by a fisherman who had his lobster pots under the headland.

Dolly had been in Inverness that day having her hair styled and highlighted, an activity which appeared obscene in view of what was happening to Arthur around the same time. She heard through her neighbour, the lobster fisherman, who warned her not to go to Edith; she was refusing to see anyone: the man's wife, who cleaned for her, the minister, even the doctor.

Dolly scarcely noticed the man's warning; she wouldn't have visited anyway. Arthur had been her life. The affair had been terminated in its prime; she forgot that she'd been aware that such intensity was too consuming to last. For two days she drank. She

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ran out of alcohol, went to the pub, and bought more whisky. On the third morning, listless and hungover, avid to talk about her lover, she heard that Edith had asked the fisherman's wife to come up and clean the house.

Dolly bathed, put on a sober but elegant suit, applied makeup with care, and drove to the house, which she knew would be haunted by the dead man, would even smell of him, but for that very reason she couldn't keep away.

Edith was hoeing the asparagus. She looked up as the gate creaked and gave a little gasping cry. Dolly advanced, frightened, wide-eyed, as if pulled by strings.

The widow stumbled across the garden, trampling plants. They fell into each other's arms and sobbed like children. She knows, Dolly thought; oh, what the hell does it matter now? But she kept quiet, aware that this storm of emotion was too unusual, unprecedented, could be dangerous. Edith should be over the first shock of grief by now.

They sat on a wooden bench, Edith holding her visitor's hand in her own plump paws. Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, Dolly thought hysterically, and looked for the shade of her lover among the rainbow lupins.

". . . work," Edith was saying, staring in the same direction. "It's what he would have advised, what he said when Mama died; he was so kind, so supportive . . . he allowed me to grieve awhile and then he chivvied me outside—here, actually, I can see him now"—she looked beyond the lupins to the neat scaffolding of beanpoles—"he puts those up every year for me . . . I shall never plant runner beans again. Who is there to cook for?"

"Yourself." Dolly licked her lips. "Friends."

"Friends, of course. I'm so wrapped up in my own loss that I forget there are other people in the world, but then, d'you see, we were so *close.*" Edith looked back at the house as if seeing it for the first time. "Perhaps we shouldn't have come here; the isolation threw us too much together. We became fused, you know?"

"He had a good life." Dolly seized desperately on the cliché.

"He had another twenty years of active life ahead of him." Edith was tart.

"You don't know that. He liked to live dangerously."

Edith was speculative, following her own tack. "Or I could have died before him," she mused. "As if I cared—now." She turned back to Dolly. "How does one go on? What does a person live for when they've lost the other one? The other half." She laughed harshly. "Now I know the meaning of the term. It's like your Siamese twin dying."

"It's not." Dolly was brutal. "Then the surviving twin is still

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attached to the corpse. You lost Arthur through a kind of surgery. You're still physically whole yourself."

"I don't have his corpse," Edith said.

Over the ensuing days, Dolly's grief and guilt turned to anger. Had it been wintertime she would have gone off to Zermatt or the Oberland to ski off-piste, but this was summer and if she couldn't have the crazy thrill of racing avalanches she must succumb to Edith's cloying power and her interminable memories of dear Arthur, who was, in fact, an unmitigated bastard. Rage seethed as Dolly came to face the fact that she hadn't been in love at all, merely scratching an itch. The affair had been no more than lust, her final fling before settling to middle age and whatever one did in middle age. Apathy loomed, and when Edith broached the possibility of her moving in to share the big house ("So empty, dear; there's no way I can stay here on my own") she actually hesitated before declining, careful not to hurt the other's feelings. Pity was the shakiest of foundations on which to build a relationship and there was always the risk that one day, drunk or bored, the bond between them tightening, she would blurt out the truth. And all Edith had left of Arthur was his image, even his vices admirable. "He could be very naughty," she'd said a few days after his disappearance.

"What can you mean?" Dolly asked, far too brightly, but then neither was normal these days.

Edith tried not to smile. "He shot ravens."

Dolly gulped. "So?"

"Ravens! They're protected. But they were taking the black guillemots' eggs. That day he went to Solon Head he was going to shoot the pair"—her voice dropped—"if it killed him, he said."

Dolly thought about it. "So you reckon he went too close to the edge trying to shoot them and—but the *Jeep* went over! He couldn't have been shooting from the Jeep."

"Oh, my dear, post mortems!" Edith made a gesture as if pushing something away. "I told you because you asked how he was naughty. He shot the black-backed gulls, too."

Dolly stared. She had no feelings either way, but she was surprised that Arthur should have carried wildlife management to such extremes. He'd never mentioned this to her. "But then the Jeep was probably illegal," she murmured. "Did you tell the police he had a gun with him?"

"Of course not, they wouldn't understand. Arthur was in the right, there are too many predators; he was merely culling."

Not quite. Culling is selective. Dolly didn't say so; she wouldn't argue with Edith on the subject of Arthur.

As Edith recovered her equilibrium she realised that she was

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monopolising her friend, told her that she must go out, take pictures, stretch herself. When Dolly demurred, Edith said stoutly that she needed exercise herself and they went to the sea cliffs, Edith taking one of Arthur's walking sticks. Dolly thought the choice of route morbid, but there wasn't a lot of choice; inland there were only the untracked moors and mountains which would be way beyond Edith, even with a walking stick.

"He loved the cliffs," the widow said as they strolled across the daisy-studded turf. It appeared that even on this walk, supposed to be therapeutic, they were not to escape him. Dolly just hoped they wouldn't find his body washed up in a cove, and was amazed that she should be anticipating his reappearance with something akin to petulance.

They didn't go to Solon Head, although it was visible this clear afternoon, an occasional silent bloom of foam at its foot from a striking wave. When the women's eyes strayed that way they said nothing, each guarding her thoughts, Dolly flinching at sight of those other places: secret pockets set back from the edge of the cliffs that recalled such different images from the one of Arthur plunging to his death.

They came to the flowery tunnels. Absently Dolly started to explain about the caverns under their feet, leading her companion further, to the pit where the base had already collapsed and nothing showed below but the bleak void.

Edith was politely interested and predictably single-minded. "Such a riot of flowers," she said. "A pity orchids won't take if they're transplanted. I'd love some in the garden."

"You could try." Dolly advanced to the lip, shielding her eyes against the sun. "Where do you see orchids?"

Edith made some sound, but Dolly didn't catch the words. She felt something hard like a blow on her back, had a flash of comprehension: the ground was unstable, she was fainting in the wrong place, and then came the falling—sliding rather, but unable to stop—arms flailing as she tried to turn, to clutch—anything, but there was only air, a rushing of air—and the crash. She heard the crash distinctly.

She was still hearing it when consciousness started to return, but then the sound was gone and her name was being called. She was too disoriented to respond.

". . . listen to me," Edith was shouting. "If you can hear me . . . Stay there. Don't move. I'll be back."

Dolly had experience of fractures. She must have fallen feet first and both legs were shattered. Her arms seemed to be whole and she could move her head, so apparently the spine wasn't damaged. Where she'd landed, the cavern was dry, but seawards, water gleamed below a brighter sky, sucking and heaving between verti-

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cal rock walls. No way out there if you couldn't swim, but it would be the way in. Rescue would come by boat, thank God, less painful than being hauled up through the funnel.

As her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, she saw that she was surrounded by the debris of winter storms: a hatch cover draped with dry weed, spars and pallets, a pale plastic float, even the remains of sheep that had fallen through the hole.

She stared at the float and it stared back at her. She wiped her eyes to clear them of motes or blood, whatever was distorting her vision. She crawled forward, dragging her useless legs.

Arthur watched her come with wide dead eyes.

The binoculars were still round his neck and the shotgun was beside him. She unbuttoned his shirt and stroked the hard, unblemished chest. She seized her arms round the cold flesh and felt the gaping wound below the shoulders.

She lowered him gently and looked out at the bright empty world beyond the mouth of the cavern, knowing that it would remain empty. Edith wasn't coming back. ●

Lighthouse

by Katherine H. Brooks

The old man climbed the spiral stairs. His practiced step was slow.
He paused to pat the wooden beams he'd polished long ago,
And mused about the chores he'd done before they'd called him old,
before his weathered home was deemed unfit for use, and sold.

And when he'd conquered, short of breath, that vast expanse of stair,
his troubled mind was shocked to find a plush apartment there.
To have his shining torch usurped by tourists on vacation
would never do. He checked the view, with rising indignation.

He watched the myriad of lights that twinkled off the shore,
of ships that once compelled his nights, but looked to him no more,
Then eyed, again, the furniture, the rug, the Chinese vase,
and every part that, in his heart, was strange and out of place.

It took a single kitchen match to set it all to burning.
The old man chuckled at the sight, saluted once, and turning,
Limped slowly down the spiral stairs to reach the floor below,
delighted that his beacon shone with such a lovely glow.

It wasn't hard to find the way, and, guided by his light,
he quickly found the open door, and vanished in the night.
The end of such a landmark seemed, to some, a tragic story,
but not to one who'd granted it a final blaze of glory.

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Love and Murder

by O'Neil De Noux

"'Love and Murder' is where the lead character from one of my two mystery series first meets the lead character from the other," says author O'Neil De Noux. Those two characters being, of course, LaStanza, the hero of several novels and of the *EQMM* story "Why" (4/93), and John Raven Beau, the cop who served as amateur sleuth in the 6/99 *EQMM* story "Murder Most Sweet."

I first saw her standing at the back of the crowd awaiting the St. Patrick's Day parade along narrow Constance Street. Her dark brown hair, parted on the side, fell across her left eye as she leaned forward to see if the parade was getting close. She turned slightly, brushed her hair back, and looked right at me, but only for a moment.

Standing in the center of the street in my uniform, I put my left hand on the handle of my PR-24 night stick, letting my right hand rest on the butt of my stainless-steel .357 magnum revolver.

The light sweater she wore was exactly the same color as my powder-blue, New Orleans police shirt. She tucked her hands into the rear pockets of her black jeans.

I pulled off my sunglasses and slipped them into the epaulet atop my left shoulder. Moving closer, I stared at her while trying to look as if I wasn't staring.

"Officer," a little boy dressed all in green called out, "is the parade close?"

I pointed down the block to my sergeant and told the boy that he was the man to ask. That was the seventh person I'd sent to my sergeant. He hadn't figured it out yet.

Without my sunglasses, I could see that her full lips were a dark crimson, her eyes dark brown, several shades darker than mine. She was about twenty, twenty-one maybe, with a pale complexion and smooth, porcelain skin. No other way to put it: She was gorgeous, a dark-haired, uptown New Orleans beauty.

As she slowly walked away, I noticed her slim body, her nice full breasts and round hips. She took her hands out of her pockets and waved. Two men moved through the crowd toward her. The taller

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man took her in his arms and twisted her around. She threw back her head and laughed as she pushed herself away.

The loud blast of a siren turned my attention back to the street as two N.O.P.D. motorcycles, one on each side of the street, moved toward me. Behind was the first group of marchers. Time to get out of the way.

As I backed up, I looked for her and caught a flash of powder blue moving away through the crowd. With the men on either side, she disappeared into the throng of parade-goers.

For the next two hours, I worked the most aggravating parade in New Orleans, pushing aside drunk after drunk prancing around with tall bouquets of flowers as they solicited kisses from women.

Worse were the intoxicated women paraders, who were drawn to the cops like hungry mosquitoes at a nudist picnic. At six-two, I was tall enough to avoid the lips and tongues of most of the sloppy smoochers, though I did kiss a few of the younger, prettier, less inebriated ones.

One middle-aged redhead, who claimed to be real Irish, pointed to my nameplate and said, "Beau. Doesn't that mean 'pretty' in French?"

Beautiful, actually, but I wasn't about to tell her that.

She pulled a rose from her bouquet. "How old are you, baby?"

"Young enough to be your son." I backed away from the rose she presented me.

"Come on," she urged. "French kiss me, you sexy Frenchman."

I walked up the parade route away from her, not bothering to tell her I'm only half French. At twenty-three, out of the academy seven months, I was still a rookie, but not green enough for this bullshit. My sergeant had warned us at roll call that the St. Patrick's Day parade of 1988 could be the rowdiest ever. It was bad, even by New Orleans standards. I stopped three fights and moved intoxicated revelers along, all the while searching for her.

It hit me near the end of the parade that I'd probably never see her again. My luck. She was the kind of girl I'd been looking for since arriving in New Orleans, this city of dark-haired beauties who always seemed just beyond my reach.

I experienced that familiar sense of inferiority again. Growing up in a Cajun daubed house, little more than a shack, on the swamp along Vermilion Bay, I didn't realize how poor we were until I went to school. I never fit in at any school, even L.S.U. Trying to fit into the N.O.P.D. hadn't been easy.

The only time I ever really fit in was with my Cajun father as we hunted and fished the swamps and bayous of my childhood. After he died, my mother, a full-blooded Oglala Sioux, resettled in South Dakota with her people.

As the last paraders passed and the N.O.P.D. command vehicle

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lumbered by, my buddy waved me toward him. Ted LeBreton, with his long brown hair sticking out the sides of his police hat, stood a half-block up the parade route, in front of another wild Irish bar brimming with people drinking green beer from plastic cups.

"Having fun yet?" Ted goaded me.

I just shook my head.

"We'll have fun tonight."

"Tonight?"

Ted gave me a pained look. "The Civic. Tonight. My cousin with five other girls. Remember?"

Five other girls? Who was I to resist, being half French and all?

My sharp Sioux eyes spotted her as soon as Ted and I entered The Civic Dance Club. In a fire-red dress, she danced with two other girls near the front of a stage that had been converted into a dance floor. The driving beat of Springsteen's "Dancing in the Dark" echoed in the cavernous building, once a movie theater. Nearly a hundred tables filled the auditorium, crowded with men in three-piece suits and women dressed in the newer-styled short skirts. Immediately, I wished I'd worn something other than a black polo shirt and pleated tan pants. The baggy black jacket I wore was to hide my off-duty 9mm Smith and Wesson Model 669, tucked into the waistband of my pants at the small of my back. It was hot in the bar, so I pulled my sleeves up.

As Ted led me through the maze of tables, I watched her. Unlike the flashy blonde and the wired brunette dancing with her, she moved slowly, almost languidly, against the beat of the music. Her dress was short, but not a mini-dress. It was snug, but not too tight. Her red high heels were spiked and her legs sleek and shapely.

We arrived at a table about halfway through the crowd where three women with various shades of blond hair sat behind their mixed drinks. Three unattended mixed drinks were also on the table, along with six purses.

As Ted introduced me to the three women at the table, the song ended and she came off the stage, her two friends following. Two guys fell in at the rear of the line. They were the same guys I'd seen with her on the parade route. It wasn't until she was twenty feet away that I realized she was heading for our table. I stepped behind Ted, who opened his arms.

The blonde squealed loudly and raced into Ted's arms. He introduced her as Angela, and the wired brunette as Donna. He introduced the men, too, but I wasn't listening.

"And the woman in red is my cousin, Laurie." Ted rolled his eyes. "But she's taken."

Cousin? She was his cousin!

She moved around Ted and Angela and focused her velvet brown

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eyes on me. A long chill shivered along my spine. The hair on my arms tingled.

"This is my buddy," Ted said, "John Raven Beau. He's half Sioux Indian."

Laurie continued to stare into my eyes, almost intrusively, a dead-serious look on her smooth face. Van Halen's "Why Can't This Be Love?" drew most of the couples from our table. Angela pulled Ted toward the dance floor. Laurie continued staring at me as she gently bit her lower lip.

"I saw you in the street today," she said in a deep, throaty voice.

"I saw you, too."

She put her arm next to mine and said, "Nice bronze skin."

I'd been described as dark-complected, but never bronze.

Up close, I could see she was around five-eight, but petite, almost delicate. She asked what I was drinking and when I told her nothing yet, she grabbed my hand and led me to one of the side bars where she ordered a B-52, which looked like chocolate milk with ice. I ordered an Abita beer.

She offered me a sip of her drink. It tasted like Bosco. "The same as a mudslide," she said as she led me back. "Only on the rocks."

"What did Ted mean? You're taken?"

"He's teasing. My old boyfriend moved to France."

We arrived at our table just as Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love" started and Laurie immediately put her drink down, grabbed my arm, and said, "Let's dance." We passed the two men from the parade route on the way to the stage. "The big one's my brother, in from Ole Miss. The other's another cousin," Laurie explained as we climbed the steps to the dance floor.

Picking up in mid song, she danced in front of me so smoothly and sexily, I could only have looked bad beside her. She moved at half-speed through Hall and Oates's "Maneater" and Bon Jovi's "You Give Love a Bad Name."

She turned leisurely, rolling her hips as she danced, her breasts swaying; then, as the song ended, she looked into my eyes for a long, long time and I felt it, the tugging, the flirting, the sweet fall into a strong, strong attraction.

She squeezed my hand as we started from the dance floor, then turned suddenly as the familiar strains of "Kokomo" started.

"I love this song!"

She put her hands on my hips and we danced close enough for our bodies to brush together, steel drums echoing behind us. She kissed my cheek and I kissed her neck at her jawline. She threw back her head and laughed.

As the song ended, she closed the space between us and leaned up to kiss me. Delicately at first, our lips barely touching, until her tongue slipped into my mouth right there on the dance floor in a

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long, deep kiss that went on and on. I felt her arms around me, pulling me tighter, felt the weight of her breasts against me.

On our way back to our table she asked if I really lived on a boat on Lake Pontchartrain.

"A houseboat, actually. In Bucktown."

"Ted mentioned it. It sounds so sexy."

She stopped to let two couples pass. "What did he tell you about me?"

"Nothing. Not a damn thing."

She seemed puzzled, and for a second angry, maybe, or hurt. Then she blinked those dark browns at me and said, "I'd like to see that houseboat."

I nodded. We'd reached our table, which was empty, as the others were still on the dance floor. She looked around to make sure no one was near, then scooped up her tiny red purse and led me away through the auditorium for the door.

"Where do you sleep?" she said, standing next to my sofa on the main floor of my houseboat.

I pointed to the steep stairs leading up to my loft.

"Your bedroom's a loft?" Her eyebrows rose as she put a hand on my shoulder and slipped out of her high heels. I watched her hips move up the stairs. She looked around, then looked down and asked if I was coming up or what?

I took the stairs three at a time.

With the upstairs portholes open and a nice breeze fluttering the curtains, the loft was cooler than downstairs, even with the window air conditioner working. Laurie ran her fingers through her hair, then shook it. She moved to me, raising her arms over my shoulders. We kissed gently, slowly, smoothly, until the heat took over. She was wild and I felt wilder.

Suddenly she pulled away. Breathing heavily, she gasped, "Just stand back and watch."

Jesus!

She reached around and unzipped her dress, stepped out of it, and tossed it over the railing down to the living room. She wore a lacy, white, French-cut bra and sheer pantyhose. Biting her lower lip again, she unsnapped her bra and tossed it over the railing, too. Her breasts were perfectly symmetrical, oversized for her thin body. She was so gorgeous standing there showing them off to me.

Slowly, she worked her pantyhose down and sent it flying downstairs. My heart thundered.

Hands on her hips, she did a slow turn for me, watching me leer at her. "Your turn," she said in that deep, throaty voice.

I tried not to strip too quickly, tossing my clothes down with hers until I stood naked before her. She gave me a good long look

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before climbing onto my bed. She rolled onto her back as I crawled next to her. In the dim moonlight streaming through the portholes, I looked into her dark eyes for a long moment. Her stare wasn't as intrusive now. Her eyes seemed to soften as she parted her lips slightly and pulled me down to her. Long, sweet, loving kisses gave way to the heat of passion. She pulled me atop her.

Laurie reached for the pleasure, embraced it, and her face seemed even more beautiful.

After, as our heartbeats began the long return to normal, Laurie climbed out of bed and went downstairs.

"No ashtrays?"

"I don't smoke."

She came back up with a saucer, her purse dangling from her shoulder, and a lit cigarette. She wasn't perfect after all. But she still looked gorgeous. I didn't care if she burned the place down so long as she climbed back in with me.

She did.

"Your houseboat is so cozy," she said. She let out a long trail of smoke. "Why do you call it *Sad Lisa?*"

"It was already named that when I bought it." For me, the name fit. My cousin Lisa died of leukemia when I was eight.

"Thought maybe it might be from the Cat Stevens song." She put the butt out and snuggled into my arms.

I could still smell her perfume over the smoke and the scent of our sweaty bodies cooling in the light breeze filtering in from the lake. The quiet of Bucktown, that semiwild area along the lakefront sandwiched between the big city and the sprawling suburbs of Jefferson Parish, quickly lulled Laurie to sleep.

I listened to her deep, steady breathing. I watched her face, almost childlike in its beauty. No way I could sleep. It was still hard to believe she was here with me, this dark-haired, uptown beauty.

Ted was off for the next two days, and so was my regular partner, Tim Rothman, so I got to ride alone. The Second Police District, jokingly called the Uptown Police, wasn't a bad assignment for a rookie. Mostly residential, it included the stately mansions along St. Charles Avenue; the universities, Tulane and Loyola; and Audubon Park. My beat ran along the riverfront, covering the docks along Tchoupitoulas Street and the lower-middle-class neighborhoods nearest the river. Laurie LeBreton lived in an adjoining beat, in a wooden, shotgun double on Upperline Street.

The evening watch was always bad. I handled twenty-two calls that shift, including four car thefts and a purse-snatching, catching the perpetrator when he ran around the corner past me as I sat writing up a car-theft report in my marked police car. He wasn't hard to catch, being all winded. He started crying when I slapped

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the cuffs on him. (All right, I might have slapped the cuffs on a little hard. Poor purse-snatcher.)

You'd think that, bouncing from call to call, I wouldn't have had time to think of Laurie. But she was never off my mind. I was tempted to drive by her house—I even crossed Upperline a couple of times—but not wanting to push it, I didn't turn onto the street.

I called her after work and left a message on her answering machine. She didn't call back. I distracted myself by watching an offbeat cable-TV movie called *Local Hero*. But when the movie ended with a phone ringing, a phone no one answered, I gave in and called, only to leave another message for her.

Next day, I called her again, from the courthouse where I sat waiting to testify at an armed-robbery trial in Division A. When her machine came on I hung up, not wanting to leave a third message.

I spent the day waiting for the slow mechanics of justice to conclude the trial of one Billy "Big Head" Watts, accomplished armed robber with a cranium as large as a small watermelon. Big Head had pulled five armed robberies in the Second District, two on my shift. He wore different clothes each time, but witnesses were quick to describe his huge, melonlike head. He always drove away on a black motorcycle. Not wanting to be stopped by police, he dutifully donned his black motorcycle helmet first.

After the second Big Head robbery on my shift, I decided to drop by several motorcycle places. An ex-Jefferson Parish sheriff's deputy working at Bad Bikes on Magazine Street eagerly gave me Big Head's name and address. Three months earlier, William R. Watts had specially ordered an extra-extra-extra large black helmet.

When Billy opened his door and saw my uniform, he turned and ran. I caught him in the backyard after he tumbled down the back steps of his mother's house, breaking his ankle. He confessed to the robberies, but claimed I broke his ankle.

There was an Internal Affairs investigation. I was cleared.

Big Head's trial ended a half-hour before my roll call that afternoon. Guilty as charged.

At roll call, as Lieutenant Tusa read the usual police bulletins to us, I couldn't stop wondering why Laurie hadn't called back. I shook the thoughts away and took notes about the epidemic of armed robberies along North Claiborne. House burglaries were up in the university section. The Narcotics Division was working a surveillance on Laurel Street, so stay away.

Just as roll call ended, the desk sergeant called out to me.

"John Raven Beau. Phone call. Line three."

I didn't recognize Ted's voice at first, because it was so angry.

"Stay away from Laurie," he growled.

"What?"

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"Quit calling her. She doesn't want to see you."

"But—"

Ted hung up on me.

Jesus! What the hell had happened?

I had two calls waiting for me—a fight in progress at Tony's Bar at Tchoupitoulas and Cadiz, and a missing person on Annunciation. The fight was over before I arrived, and the missing person—a seventy-year-old man—arrived back home just before I arrived at his house.

A surprisingly cool breeze blew in from the river. I rolled down my front windows. Pulling around the corner to park and start my paperwork, I realized I was on Upperline. Inexorably I continued on. I couldn't stop myself. A quick drive by, I told myself.

As I crossed St. Charles Avenue, I spotted several people standing in the street just before Laurie's house. I eased forward and realized, before I could turn away, that they were plainclothes officers.

A thin blond woman wearing a tan suit, a shoulder rig crisscrossing her back and a detective's gold star-and-crescent badge clipped to the front of her skirt, turned and waved me forward. "And who are you?" she said.

"John Raven Beau. What's going on?"

She jotted my name on her pad.

A smallish detective in a neat gray suit stood in the center of the street in front of my car. He was taking notes. I'd seen him in passing at headquarters. Homicide Detective LaStanza. He looked up at me and ran his fingers down over his thick moustache.

Another detective stood on Laurie's front porch, an oversized version of LaStanza in a brown suit—same dark hair and full moustache. He looked a little like a bear.

"What's going on?" I asked the blond detective again.

"Signal thirty," she told me, and the code word for murder took the breath out of my lungs.

"I knew the woman who lived there," I said. "She's dead?"

The detective nodded.

"Laurie LeBreton? About five-eight? Brown hair? Dark brown eyes?"

She looked at her notes and said yes, Laurie LeBreton.

I closed my eyes. "She was only twenty."

"How'd you know her?"

It took a few seconds for me to catch my breath, but I managed to answer, "I went out with her night before last."

The detective's eyes widened. She told me she was Jodie Kintyre and then she waved LaStanza over. LaStanza focused a pair of piercing green eyes on me as Detective Kintyre told him what I'd just told her. He showed no reaction. He looked younger up close, in his early thirties, maybe.

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"How well did you know her?" he asked me.

"One date." My voice sounded distant and hollow.

The screeching of brakes behind me turned us all around. A red Mustang skidded to a stop just short of my rear bumper. Ted LeBreton, in a T-shirt and jeans, jumped out and raced for Laurie's front porch. He tried to get around the big bear detective, who snatched him by the arm and pulled him off the porch. There were shouts, but I couldn't understand what was said.

Ted let out a scream and pulled away. I thought he was going to throw up, bent over as he was on the sidewalk. I started to climb out of my car, but Detective Kintyre told me to stay put as she and LaStanza took a step away to confer.

Ted looked up, straight at me, his face red, his hands in fists. He let out an inarticulate, animal howl and rushed toward me.

LaStanza cut him off, tripping him and shoving a knee in his back as he hit the pavement. The big bear detective was there in a second and pulled Ted up by the back of his collar.

"Bastard!" Ted screeched. "He did it! He killed her!" He pointed at me, his face contorted with rage.

The two detectives walked him to an unmarked police car and pressed him against it. Jodie Kintyre joined them. Ted continued shouting and LaStanza shoved a finger in his face and shouted back. Reaching around him, LaStanza pulled out my friend's off-duty .38 as the big bear detective held him against the car.

Detective Kintyre came around to the passenger side of my car and said that we were going to headquarters. She climbed in, crossing her legs, notebook in her lap. "Sergeant Mark Land—the big guy who looks like a bear—will call your lieutenant and tell him where you are," she said. She gave me a long stare before she added, "You're the one who shot the cowboy."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't 'ma'am' me. I'm Jodie." She was only a few years older than me, in her late twenties, maybe thirty. Her hair, cut in a neat pageboy, was yellow-blond. A slight smile came to her mouth. "I heard all about it from the other shift. You're part Indian, aren't you?"

"Sioux."

Her eyes narrowed for a moment before she looked back at her notes.

I was the one, all right. It had happened three months ago. A man in a cowboy outfit, ten-gallon hat, leather vest, boots and spurs, and two nickel-plated revolvers in a double-holster rig had walked up to a group of cops, including my partner Tim Rothman, standing outside the Second District Station House. The cowboy stopped about twenty feet away, spread his feet, and told the cops to draw. He had his hands over his guns, like a gunfighter.

Ever the clown, Rothman took out his notepad and drew a stick

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figure of the cowboy and showed it to him. Everyone laughed, except the cowboy. That's what caught my attention as I crossed Magazine Street from where I'd parked my car, the laughter.

The cowboy drew both guns and fired. He blew out the windows of the police car Rothman was standing next to and sent everyone diving to the sidewalk. I pulled out my .357 magnum and dropped him with two shots. Later, I found out he was a mental case. In and out of Mandeville State Hospital. Bought the guns by mail order. I had no trouble in front of the grand jury, but still caught hell in the department. Injun kills cowboy.

"Ted thinks you killed her," Jodie said without looking up.

I shook my head and stopped for a red light.

"He said you were stalking Laurie."

"Stalking? Stalking?!" I tried to calm my voice.

"What were you doing driving by her house just now?"

She watched me carefully as the light turned green and I proceeded. "That's the first time I've been by her house since I dropped her off yesterday morning."

She waited for me to continue.

"We had a . . . great time together."

"Really?" She wasn't convinced.

"Seriously!" I fought to remain calm. "We . . . it was . . ." I took in a deep breath. "It was an incredible evening together. That's why I couldn't understand why she didn't call me back."

Then it hit me and I asked, "How long has she been dead?"

Jodie's hazel eyes looked at me without revealing anything. She had wide-set cat eyes.

"Wait. Don't tell me," I added quickly. "Don't tell me anything. Let me tell you everything I know."

"That's how we do it in Homicide, Officer John Raven Beau."

As I pulled into the police garage beneath Headquarters, my stomach in a gigantic knot, I felt terrible. I followed Jodie down the back hall to the Police Only elevator and up to the detective bureau. The Homicide squad room, a wide expanse of gray metal desks, smelled of cigarette ashes and stale coffee. The wall of windows facing South Broad Street was tinted green—or had been, once. Most of the tint had peeled away, giving the windows the look of peeling skin.

Jodie led me to the coffee pot, where she started up a fresh pot of coffee and chicory. Above the pot, hanging on the wall below an electric wall clock, was an art deco painting of a vulture perched atop a gold star-and-crescent badge. Welcome to N.O. Homicide.

"This way," Jodie said, leading me to a small, windowless interview room. She asked me to take the chair behind a small wooden table. The chair was also wooden, and uncomfortable. Jodie went

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back out to the squad room and returned with a cushioned metal chair for herself and a cup of coffee for me.

"There's cream and sugar," she said as she sat across the table from me, her back to the door.

I shook my head.

She reached back and closed the door, opened her notepad, and clicked her ballpoint pen. "How long have you been in the department?"

"Seven months."

"How'd you meet Laurie LeBreton?"

I told her everything, seeing Laurie at the parade and getting surprised at The Civic, how she was my buddy's cousin.

Jodie interjected, "This city's nothing but a small town. Know what LaStanza says about calling it The Big Easy?"

I shook my head.

"It's not big and there's nothing easy about it."

I told her about taking Laurie back to my houseboat.

"You live in a houseboat?"

"It's old. Moored in Bucktown."

I told her about the sex and how beautiful Laurie was, even with her makeup worn away in the morning light. How I'd dropped her off at home, kissing her goodbye.

"You went back home afterward?"

"I was dead tired. Slept until roll call."

I told her about the twenty-two calls that evening and the dumbass purse-snatcher and how I'd called Laurie and left two messages.

"I never saw her or spoke with her again," I heard myself say.

"What about today?"

I told her about Billy "Big Head" Watts and how I was in court from eight-thirty until three-thirty. About calling but hanging up when Laurie still didn't answer.

Looking up from her notes, she said, "Earlier you said you only called her twice." The cat eyes stared into mine.

"I didn't want to leave a third message, as if I was . . . desperate."

"Were you?"

"No. I just . . . wanted to talk to her."

Muffled voices sounded outside the door. One was Ted's, loud and angry. A door slammed. A moment later someone tapped on our door. When Jodie opened it, I could see it was LaStanza. She closed the door as she stepped out.

I stood and stretched.

A half-hour later, Jodie came back in with two bottles of Coke and passed one to me. It was so icy it made my throat tight.

I put my elbows up on the table. I couldn't get comfortable in that damn wooden chair.

"It's tough when it's someone you like," Jodie said.

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I nodded. "I just remembered. She said her old boyfriend moved to France."

"Your 'buddy,' Ted LeBreton, is accusing you."

I stared back at her for a long moment. "He's messed up."

Jodie took a sip of her Coke and told me my alibi checked out. Then she told me Laurie had been killed between ten A.M. and two P.M. that afternoon. The ensuing quiet lasted a good three minutes. Then I remembered Ted calling me at the district right after roll call, about four-fifteen.

She put it in her notes.

I tried pushing back in the chair, but couldn't get comfortable.

"What's the matter with this chair?"

"The front legs are a half-inch shorter than the back legs. Keeps suspects leaning forward. Very uncomfortable."

No kidding.

"Come on." Jodie led me into the squad room, to her gray metal desk. Just as I sat in a padded metal chair next to it, Sergeant Land came in with a skinny man with curly black hair cut in a mohawk. Wearing a filthy white T-shirt and baggy shorts, face and arms smeared with mud, the man seemed in a daze. Land put him in the interview room we had just departed, closed the door, and waved Jodie over.

When she came back she told me Mohawk lived two doors down from Laurie. He was found peeking over the wooden fence of her backyard as they were processing the crime scene.

Jodie slipped a daily report form into her typewriter and quickly filled it, her fingers dancing over the keys. An hour and three daily report sheets later, Sergeant Land came out of his interview room, followed by Mohawk. Land sat him at a far desk. Jodie started to get up, but Land came over, put a friendly hand on my shoulder, and introduced himself formally.

"Dildo back there is a registered sex offender, but I'm pretty sure he's not involved," he said.

Jodie shrugged. Land rubbed his knuckles over his eyes.

"LaStanza's still in with LeBreton?"

"Yep."

They both looked at the closed interview-room door two doors away from the one I had been in. The door to the squad room opened behind us and Lieutenant Tusa, my superior, came in and asked for the key to my squad car.

"We'll need it for the next shift," he said firmly.

"Lieutenant," Land said, "thanks for letting us have Beau. He's been a real help."

Tusa's demeanor changed immediately. "No problem," he said. "Keep him as long as you need him."

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"Could you do us another favor?" Land asked. "Could you bring Mohawk over there back home? He lives in your district."

Tusa wasn't happy, but he left with Mohawk bobbing behind him.

Armed with fresh coffees, the three of us settled around Jodie's desk. "They don't call you the Raven, do they?" Land asked, leaning back, his shirt disheveled and tie dangling.

"Nope."

"Good. I hate nicknames."

Smiling slightly, Jodie told me LaStanza's nickname.

"His father, retired Captain LaStanza, calls him his little leopard. So he's the Leopard. Pound for pound, nature's most efficient killing machine."

"The last man," Land added, "I'd want after me."

For the next hour, they told stories of the only homicide detective with a perfect solution record.

"Like a leopard," Jodie said, "he sniffs blood and goes for the kill. He's relentless."

We finished the new pot of coffee and were halfway through another when LaStanza came out of his interview room, closing the door behind him. He was without a coat, his tie loosened. He noticed the fresh coffee and headed for it.

Jodie reached into the drawer of the desk next to hers, pulled out a black mug, and met her partner at the coffee table. Land stood up and nodded for me to follow.

LaStanza's green eyes were bright and piercing.

"You got him?" Jodie said.

LaStanza nodded. "He just copped."

It took a second for me to realize and my knees felt suddenly weak. "You mean . . . ?" I heard myself say.

"Yeah," LaStanza answered. "Your buddy killed his cousin."

I needed to sit, but there was no chair so I leaned against the table.

"I can't believe it."

"Believe it." LaStanza poured coffee into the mug Jodie handed him, dropping in cream and sugar. "I need the crime lab," he told his partner. He took the cup of coffee with him as he led Sergeant Land back into the interview room where Ted had just confessed.

Jodie picked up her radio and called for a crime-lab technician. I sat heavily and tried to understand what I'd just heard.

"Jesus! Ted killed her?"

She raised her hand and said, "Let LaStanza explain it all. No use speculating."

Twenty minutes later, a burly crime-lab tech came in carrying a black case and Jodie led him to the interview room. She and LaStanza stepped out, freshened their coffee mugs, and came over, LaStanza sitting in the chair at his desk, next to Jodie's.

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Jodie perked up. "Okay. How'd you turn him?"

LaStanza opened his left hand, then closed it, flapping his fingers together like a mouth. "He shot off his mouth. I let him. He talked himself into a corner trying to pin it on Beau here. Then couldn't get out of the corner.

"Officer LeBreton told me how you screwed Laurie and how she rebuffed you and how you wouldn't leave her alone. Made a big deal of your driving up on the scene. Then he started telling me how you could have staged it, make it look like a burglary-murder. How you probably broke the back window to get in."

"What window?" I asked.

"Exactly. I wondered how he knew about the back window. He was yakking so quickly, I let him keep going. He painted a neat picture for me, a picture only the killer could paint. Little things, like the color of Laurie's fingernail polish. He even told me she was strangled, when I hadn't mentioned it.

"Finally, when he realized he'd talked too much, it was too late. I pounced."

"Like a leopard," Jodie said.

LaStanza sneered at her. "No, I just pointed to the video camera and reminded him it was all on tape, reminded him I never told him how Laurie was killed.

"He was shook at first. It took awhile, holding his hand, until he started crying. He even admitted he tried to use you as an alibi. That he called you after roll call and told you to stay away from Laurie, as if he didn't know she was dead."

Raising his mug to me, LaStanza added, "Once they start crying, you got 'em." I noticed the red lettering on LaStanza's mug—*Why don't they just make mouse-flavored cat food?*

I sank back on the chair and closed my eyes, but the image of Ted strangling Laurie snapped them open again. "Why?" I said.

I looked at Jodie. It was LaStanza who answered. "We don't focus on why, initially. Work the how and the when, it'll lead you to the who, if you're lucky. Tonight we were lucky."

Jodie let out a long sigh. "If you know why, tell him."

"He loved her."

"Loved her?" I shot back.

"He wanted her, wanted what you had with her. Not talking about sex here, although he wanted that, too. He wanted the affection. Apparently, she really liked you." LaStanza finished his coffee and put his mug down.

Jodie spoke to me. "You know the psychology. Love and hate are opposite sides of the same coin. There's an old New Orleans saying that love and murder go together like beans and rice."

"He couldn't have her," LaStanza said. "Claims he lost control."

The coffee in my belly turned sour.

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"I just can't understand why she didn't call me back."

LaStanza looked me in the eye. "We rarely get all the answers."

"Why the crime lab?" Jodie asked her partner.

"Fingernail scrapings. Looked like skin and blood under his nails. Probably from the victim."

I tried my best to deaden the expression on my face, like a proper plains warrior—reveal nothing—especially to the white man.

The interview-room door opened. The crime-lab technician stepped out first, followed by Land. Ted came out a second later, head high, hands cuffed behind his back. Hair ruffled, eyes red, face waxen. He didn't look at me as he passed.

Rising, LaStanza followed them out.

"You all right?" Jodie asked me as we stood up.

I didn't look at her and she didn't ask again.

It wasn't until after midnight, as I lay in my bed, four empty beer bottles downstairs, that I realized I wanted to be a homicide detective.

To catch killers, that was the highest calling for a police officer. That's where I'd been heading all this time. There was some serious brainpower up there in Land and Jodie and especially LaStanza.

Only a rookie now, but if I stuck this out, that's where I wanted to go.

Shutting my eyes, I concentrated on the subtle lapping of water against *Sad Lisa* and breathed deeply and steadily, trying to let the beer lull me to sleep.

Did I miss a hint? I remembered that puzzled look on her face when I told her Ted had told me nothing about her. Should I have realized then? Was I too busy reaching for pleasure?

Her face came to me, her velvet brown eyes staring into mine, her crimson lips parted, pressing forward to kiss me, the length of her neck, the swell of her breasts.

I could feel her lips, the softness of her skin.

I had triggered Ted to kill her.

He told me she was *taken* and I didn't listen.

Hands pressed against my head, I tried convincing myself he'd have killed her sooner or later, even if she hadn't gone home with me.

But not this day.

This day, I had been the trigger.

Jesus! ●

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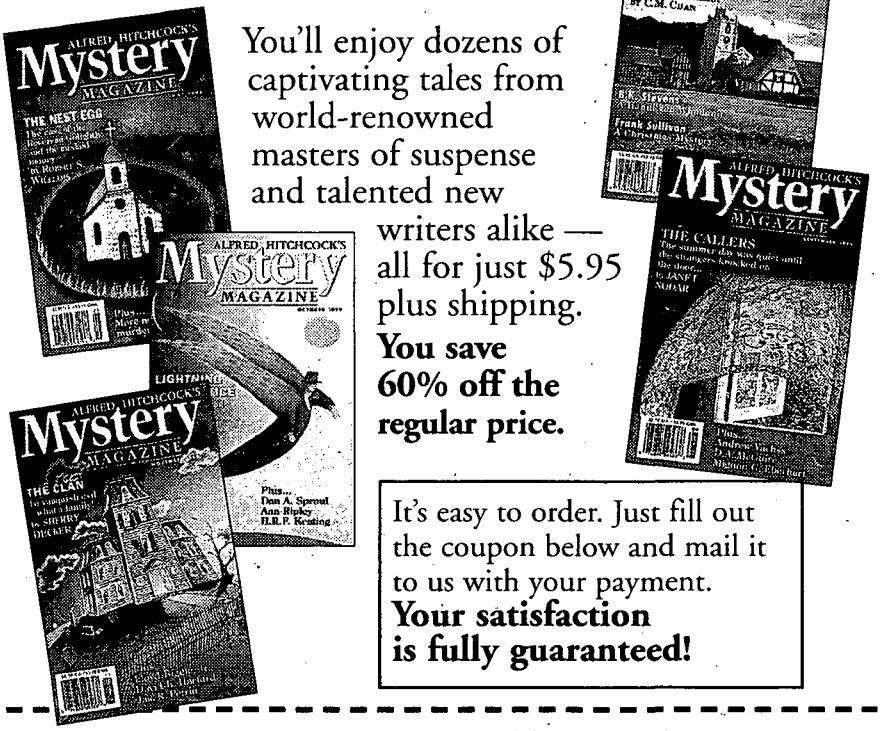

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A Confusion of Detectives

by Robert Barnard

Deputy Police Chief Svetoslav Popov drove across the flat uplands of the road towards Varna, his wife in the passenger seat beside him staring impassively at the landscape. The white Volvo was still a great pleasure to Svetoslav—it was so solid, it handled so well. "Ten thousand leva," he had whispered to his friend Inspector Antonov, "from my acquaintance in the Mafia. And a nod and a wink in the future where necessary. I introduce you sometime." He often promised to introduce his friend to his acquaintance in the Mafia, but the expansive mood never lasted long enough for it to happen.

Popov turned to his wife.

"You are looking magnificent today, my dear," he said. He was rewarded by a flicker of an eyelid. "No, I mean it. There will be no woman there to touch you."

And no man, either, he thought. Certainly not me. There has just got to be better fish to fry, even at an international conference of crime writers.

Svetoslav Popov had graduated effortlessly to his position as deputy police chief of Plovdiv through the years of transition from Communist rule to Bulgaria's present position of petitioner to enter the Common Market. Twenty years before, he had been the

Robert Barnard is said to have once remarked that his characters don't very closely resemble individuals in his life because "people can be so much nastier, can act so much meaner, than they are usually allowed to do in books." Perhaps so, but this acerbic and darkly witty new story for *EQMM* contains as nasty a villain as you're likely to meet in life or story. Be sure not to miss the author's new novel, *Unholy Dying*, published by Scribner in April of this year.

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terror of dissidents, suspected spies, and hitchhiking hippies, being known to the last group as The Bulgarian Atrocity. He was not just handy with his fists, but with his feet, and with any blunt instrument that happened to come to hand. The transition to respectability had brought some deprivations to a man of his active temperament, but many more compensations: If he had to keep his bullying nature in check, confining it to merely verbal expression, the situation of an aspiring Western-style economy brought rewards of such a deliciously material kind that he felt himself amply compensated. He and Sornitza lived well—or would live well, if she was anyone but Sornitza. A man of his status, he told himself, needed relaxation. And what had provided relaxation twenty-five, thirty years ago, today only provided irritation in the house and boredom in the bed.

He began the descent towards Varna. He was a member of the Bulgarian Union of Crime Writers by reason of his book about the Plovdiv Trunk Murders—a particularly gruesome series of six murders which had involved parts of the bodies being left in trunks and suitcases in towns up and down Bulgaria. His own part in the detection of the culprit—a student in the Sofia medical school doing a bit of practice surgery—had been small, but his book had been his way of taking the credit, or as much of it as he could without being sued for libel by his colleagues or the subject of a too-public revolt by his policemen against his authority.

"Magnificent!" he breathed again, looking at Sornitza. This time not even an eyelid flickered.

Here we go again! thought Sornitza Popova. Her husband's moves were as automatic as putting a coin in a slot machine and getting a bar of chocolate out. He contemplated adultery, he paid her in advance with flattery—with clumsy, *stupid* compliments. Sornitza Popova knew how she looked, and it wasn't magnificent. Four children, incessant domestic work, and the daily struggle for the necessities of life had taken their toll. *Once,* yes, or Svetoslav would never have looked at her. But now? Sornitza embraced her present haggardness with love: It meant her husband went elsewhere. Good. Wonderful. Just what she wanted.

Only she didn't want to be insulted by flowery stupidities about her looks. She hoped that once they got there, once they were settled into their hotel room at the Joliot-Curie Hotel, she could settle herself down there and never see her husband again till the day of departure.

Two hours later they were down in the foyer of the Joliot-Curie Hotel, and at a welcoming reception. Svetoslav always insisted that Sornitza put in a token appearance at any occasion he

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attended with her. He had hardly had more than six vodkas with the president of the B.U.C.W., however, before Sornitza said that she thought she had seen someone she knew (Someone she knew! As if faded, fiftyish Sornitza would know anyone at a Crime Writers' Conference!), and a minute later he saw her by the lift. He was on his own. He was on the loose. He was at one with his own nature.

He cast his eye around the assembly of crime writers of all nations. An unimpressive bunch, by and large, he told himself. A tall, fair-haired man, probably Scandinavian, already swaying on his feet. Svetoslav despised men who couldn't hold their drink, and took advantage of women who couldn't hold theirs. A plump, capable woman with a strong voice who seemed to be in charge. A red-faced man with a weak chin who was gesturing with his free arm like a ham actor playing Macbeth.

And then . . . Ah, possibly.

Nationality he could not guess. But smart. The sort of woman who knows she is still attractive, and dresses to be noticed. Beautifully-tailored evening trousers with a peach-coloured top. Good legs—strong legs, in fact: She looked altogether sturdy, as well as tasty. Age? Late thirties, he thought. Ideal, since he could hardly expect in such a gathering of writers to find the sort of dolly-birds he usually smacked his lips over.

He refused the president's offer of an eighth vodka, and began manoeuvering through the crowd in her direction. She was talking to a genial, squat Spaniard with a beard, but he positioned himself so he could see her name on her tag.

VERONICA DAYTON-COOMBS
GREAT BRITAIN

the tag read. British—good. He couldn't have coped with French or Italian, but British he could make a stab at.

"Madame, may I kiss your hand?" he murmured, pushing past the Spaniard.

"My hand, yes," she said coolly, holding it out. He drew it up to his lips, drawing out the moment.

"I 'ave always admire your books," he said.

"Oh, yes?"

"But it is long since I read. I am only a 'umble policeman. To find time—you understand?" He shrugged his regret.

"Oh yes. I understand."

She knew he had not read one of her books and he knew she knew. He smiled ingratiatingly.

"I look forward to hearing about policing in Bulgaria," Veronica said. "I'm sure you have some fascinating tales. Meanwhile, I'm succeeding Franco here as vice president, and we do have rather a lot to discuss."

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He turned away. He was used to losing engagements but winning the war. He heard, but did not understand, the phrase "small-town lady-killer" from behind his back.

This was the pattern for the rest of the day, and for the morning of the next one; if he made to close in on her, Veronica turned sharply away, or talked more energetically to whoever was near her. At lunch on Sunday, however, Svetoslav heard a Canadian delegate say:

"I just love Veronica's detective, what'sername Maple," and that triggered a reaction.

The next time he managed to approach her, he said from behind her back:

"You are so talented, as well as lovely: to 'ave created one of the world's greatest detectives, Miss Maple."

When she turned round she had a great, happy smile on her face, and said:

"Well, thank you—" she looked at his nametag—"Svetoslav. It's nice that you can appreciate someone so different from the women in your own country. I've always thought her a very English figure."

Svetoslav thought he was getting somewhere. Sornitza noted this on his rare visits to their room, and hoped she would soon see the last of him. She took her meals alone, reading the little devotional book she cherished (for like many Bulgarians, she had become preoccupied with religion since the fall of Communism), and she was fast asleep when he came drunken to bed, but she still felt she was having more than enough of him for the five days of the conference.

The next day they started early for a trip to Albena, everyone walking happily in the chilly sun along the wide promenades and through the attractive bleached villas and hotels. Then they drove on to Queen Marie's summer residence at Balcic, and the party splintered up a little as they roamed the precincts of the villa, with its view out to sea, its paths and steep steps, and its attractive nooks. It was in a little circular enclave that Svetoslav found her, sitting in a little stone chair like a medieval throne, gazing out to sea. Again he approached her from behind.

"Like Queen Marie, you watch for the approach of a lover from the sea?" he whispered.

"Maybe," she said, looking round at him with an expression that mingled laughter and satire. "Who knows where one's next lover will come from?"

"She was a passionate woman—like all us Bulgarians," he said, his voice throbbing.

"Actually, she was Queen of Romania. This part of the coast was Romanian then."

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"What is the difference? Romanian women are passionate, too."

"In point of fact, she was about as Romanian as I am," said Veronica. "Actually, she was what I am—an Englishwoman. But perhaps she adopted passion when she became Romania's queen."

"Passion knows no boundaries," said Svetoslav. "I myself, for instance—"

But they were interrupted by Nikki, one of the translators, coming down the steps of the villa, and in the seconds that Svetoslav froze him with a look of loathing, Veronica disappeared.

Something really nasty happened on the way back to Varna. They had left too early for the morning newspapers to have arrived from Plovdiv, but someone had picked one up in Albena and read it in the restaurant over lunch. On Saturday, the very day he had left Plovdiv, a suitcase with the arms, a leg, and the upper torso of a woman had been found at the railway station of Veliko Tornovo. The student who had been convicted of the killings, who had always protested his innocence, had immediately begun the process of appealing against his conviction and imprisonment. A statement had been made promising that the serial killings would be looked into by a commission of the highest policemen in the country, to ensure that no miscarriage of justice had occurred. At Plovdiv, a statement by Inspector Antonov said it seemed possible that injustice had been done and that every aspect of the investigation (so well known to the public, he said, through the book on the case by his colleague Svetoslav Popov) would be the subject of most minute scrutiny.

"Sodding Antonov!" screamed Popov. His face had been darkening with every word he read, closely watched by the fellow member of the Bulgarian Union of Crime Writers who had handed him the paper. Clearly he was working up to one of his monster rages—the sort of violent outburst that had acquired him his reputation and nickname.

So it was to everyone's surprise when, that evening, he marched into the dining room, satisfied smile wreathing his face, and plonked himself down at Veronica's table, ignoring the Danish couple sitting with her, and announced apparently to the whole room:

"I solve it. I know truth."

"Goodness," said Veronica. "What have you solved?"

"The new body in the trunk. I solve it."

"Really? Did your student get out of jail for one more chop-up, and then get himself back?"

"You think me fool, Veronica. You pull my foot. No, of course not. It was the best friend of his among 'is fellow students. See? And how clever! Now everyone think Raicho Jotov cannot 'ave done the early murders either. They press to 'ave 'im release. Brilliant. I solve it all when I return."

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"That's amazing," said Veronica, with apparent warmth in her voice. "Quicker than my Miss Maple."

"Oh, your Miss Maple, she only know crime in your little English village. She not know no serial killers."

"Now all you have to do is find the evidence."

"Exactly. And I shall find."

"Admirable. I'm afraid some of our English police would be tempted to manufacture it."

"Ah, Veronica," said Svetoslav, with the slightest possible flinch, "we talk no more about 'orrible matters. It is a beautiful night, and it is young, we talk about matters of the 'eart."

And talk about matters of the heart he did, over salad, over steak and sautéed potatoes, over fruity trifle. The Danish couple sat on, wondering whether Veronica needed their aid, noting it every time he grasped her hand, every time he gazed intimately into the depths of her eyes, every time, bending over her, he lowered his face to within an inch of her cleavage. As the meal ended Veronica said that the evening was getting a little chilly and she needed to go upstairs for a cardigan.

"I escort you!" announced Svetoslav.

"Quite unnecessary," she said crisply.

"Is necessary. Trust me, I know. This 'otel is full of bandits and brigands."

"If it were, then the B.U.C.W. shouldn't have chosen it for the Congress."

"Trust me, I know."

And, talking thus, he followed her like an officious Rottweiler to the lift. The lift itself was somewhat temperamental and unsuitable for advances of a semi-violent nature such as Svetoslav specialized in, but as soon as Veronica opened her door and went for her woollen cardigan, he was upon her, his arm around her shoulders as she bent over her bed.

"Veronica, my dear girl, we 'ave looked into each other's eyes, we 'ave known what is to 'appen, it is Fate, it is—OUCH! AAAH!"

But the knee, directed with incredible force into his groin, was only the start. In a second he found himself sprawled across the bed, head down towards the floor, with his right arm immobilised yet somehow paining as he'd never known pain.

"Miss Veronica, how can you do this? Nice English lady—OOHH!"

New terrible pain invaded the small of his back.

"I'm no nice English lady. And my detective's no f***ing Miss Marple. She's Marcia Maple, the toughest private eye east of Chicago. She gets her kicks from immobilising men who try to rush her. And so do I. I love the screams of pain and fear. Recognise that taste, Svetoslav?"

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A howl was his answer to her. And suddenly he found himself jerked off the bed, through the bedroom door, and out onto the balcony. It couldn't happen to him, he knew what could be done with martial arts, but it couldn't— Yet suddenly he found himself half over the balcony, looking in terror at the ground seven floors below.

"Know what it feels like now, Svetty? Know what women feel when you force your horrible prick into them? Know what suspects felt when you used to knock confessions out of them? That's the ground down there. You're soon going to be kissing it."

Suddenly she knew that all the men whom she had crushed had been leading up to this. Some day, she had known, she was going to have to go the extra inch and actually kill one of them. It was the ultimate thrill, the thing to be anticipated as the most exquisite pleasure. It was what all her hours of training had been preparing her for. Slowly she inched the body up, further and further over, then she seized a leg and toppled him over. The howl froze the night air, but it didn't last long, being succeeded by a heavy bump.

Veronica disappeared into her room. The business had really not disarranged her at all. She mussed her hair in the mirror and ripped the shoulder of her evening blouse. Then she delivered a chop with her right extended hand at her left arm. Then she opened her door and ran not to the lift but to the staircase.

"You saw how he was behaving," she mouthed, as she ran down the long dank staircase. "When we got to my room he behaved like a raging animal. I was so frightened. He had incredible force, but I'd had training, like all women should. I could only restrain him by getting him over the balcony. Then he tried to kick me, and he lost his balance and—oh, it was horrible! Terrifying!"

She thought that would do. Popov was obviously an embarrassment to the police force of the new Bulgaria. Yes, she thought nothing too terrible would happen to her.

For some reason there came into her mind a picture of the drab, middle-aged woman sitting alone at the table with her little book. She wondered if, when she heard the news, a little smile might appear at the corners of her mouth. ●

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Art by June Levine

UNFIXABLE

by Scott Mackay

Big Danny McPhail, twenty-one years old, sat on top of the hill and forced himself to watch the sunset. He couldn't concentrate on the sunset no matter how hard he tried. He looked at the path leading into the woods instead. He felt helpless, couldn't enjoy the company's annual picnic, nor the sunset, not when Karen and Serge were somewhere down that path together.

He got up, paced. He was afraid of Serge. Serge always made a point of looking for specks on the glass partitions between cubicles at the office, would summon Danny if there was even the barest trace of one on any of the many panes of glass. He sometimes thought Serge went overboard as a boss. Serge made him clean the coffee-room sink after every coffee break, even if another employee had already cleaned it. Danny kicked a clump of dirt down the hill. He slid his hands into his pockets and shook his head. Serge, on five different occasions, had called him in the middle of the night to shovel snow on the company lot. And Danny was tired of it. Danny had just about had it with Serge. Now Serge was down that path with Karen.

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He wondered if he should go down to the baseball diamond and tell Buzz Spiegel about it. Danny picked Buzz out on the playing field: a tall man, forty-nine years old, with straight shoulders, a flat-top haircut, now squatting, chewing gum, playing shortstop. If it weren't for Buzz, Karen never would have gone to the game with him last Friday night. He liked a game. He always felt like a new person after a game. Buzz was the only one who knew he loved Karen. Not even Karen knew he loved Karen. And now she was down that path with Serge.

He decided not to talk to Buzz after all. He was too shy. An excellent janitor and groundskeeper for the suburban site of Intertech Software Systems in Cleveland, but otherwise not too bright, bewildered in a situation like this. And besides, Buzz couldn't change Karen and Serge being down that path together anyway, so what was the point? In fact, Danny wasn't even sure he would go to Buzz's barbecue out on the *Blue Magnolia* on Tuesday night. He was too disheartened by everything. The best thing Big Danny could do was go home and get over it.

He was about to go to his car when he saw Karen running down the path by herself, stumbling over the grass, her purse hanging not from her shoulder but from her hand. She dragged it through the grass. As she got closer, Big Danny heard her crying. He saw that she was missing her left shoe.

He hurried down the hill after her, thinking she might need his help, wondering what Serge could have done to make her cry like that. He wanted desperately to catch her, to tell her that he was here for her, to give her help any way he could, but she started running away from him, like he was the last person she wanted to see right now. He stopped. She hurried across the footbridge. She was fleeing him? He frowned. How could that be? They had gone to the game together. And a game always brought two people closer together. He couldn't understand it.

In the dim light of dusk he saw Buzz Spiegel walk over to Karen, put his arms around her, draw her near. Danny looked down the path leading to the woods. He grew suddenly angry at Serge. After all the petty torments, this was the final straw. To

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make Karen cry like that. To make her run down the path like that, with her purse dragging and her left shoe missing.

He marched down the path, fists clenched, jaw thrust forward. He passed the marsh. He saw an island out in the marsh, with a bonfire pit. He had no idea what he was going to say to Serge. He couldn't keep any of his thoughts in order. He knew he had to say something to Serge, anything, but maybe he would just end up shaking Serge by the shoulders.

He followed the path around the marsh into the woods. Serge sometimes looked at him the same way his father did, as if he were a broken piece of machinery. The poplar, birch, and maple trees closed in around him. His dad sometimes put his hands on his hips, stared at Danny, shook his head, and called Danny . . . unfixable.

"Serge?" he called.

Serge didn't answer.

Danny kept going.

Serge sometimes stared at him in that same way, and Danny was fed up with it. All his life, he had been . . . unfixable.

He followed the path through the woods until he came to a field. As he came out of the woods, he looked around for Serge. The first stars appeared, dim and wavering. Far in the distance he saw the Cleveland skyline. On the other side of the field he saw an abandoned wrecking yard. Old cars sat in the yard, some stacked one on top of the other, their bodies rusting through. The field swept toward Lake Erie. He looked across the field, searched for Serge. He looked at Lake Erie. He saw the lights of a few boats down there. He saw thistle, goldenrod, and milkweed. Bats swooped in the air.

"Serge?" he called again.

Serge didn't answer.

Danny looked at the tall grass, saw a shadowy trail, like someone had walked through the grass; leading directly to the wrecking yard.

He followed the trail, climbed a cow-fence, and went into the wrecking yard.

A dilapidated car compressor stood next to a broken-down magnetic crane. Rust covered both machines in a uniform coating of brown dust. As he got closer to the compressor, he saw a figure standing in front of it, leaning against it. He stopped, peered more closely.

"Serge?" he said.

Serge didn't answer. Serge stood with his back to the compressor.

"Serge?" he said again.

Serge didn't reply. Serge didn't move. Serge's head hung forward, chin resting on his breastbone. Danny saw blood pooling

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darkly around Serge's running shoes, as black as ink in the dim light of the fading day.

Serge looked as if he had been hung up like a coat.

That this might be a murder occurred to Danny only when he saw Karen's shoe on the ground beside Serge.

He peered around his dead boss's shoulder and saw that Serge had been impaled through the back on a rusty lever. Danny felt numb at the discovery. His legs grew weak, and any concrete thought about possible courses of action became impossible as he struggled to get a grip on himself.

When he finally dampened his fear he tried to figure out what had happened.

Serge, making unwanted advances. Karen, growing desperate. Serge finally using his physical superiority to get what he wanted. Karen shoving Serge against the rusty lever as a way to stop him.

Danny's conception of the law in a situation like this was sketchy at best; he was a young man, still working to get his high-school diploma at night school, and didn't know much about the way police did things. Yet what he saw here—a man shoved with fatal consequences against a rusty lever—looked like murder, and any murder, even one like this, was going to have consequences. If Karen were caught, she would go to jail. And Danny, because he loved her, couldn't let that happen.

Danny thought about it for several minutes.

He finally came up with what he thought was a brilliant plan.

Get rid of the body.

Make it look like the murder never happened.

He fought to control his anxiety, examined his boss the way he might examine a plugged drain at work. Step one was to get Serge off the lever, to see how a rusty old lever—something that, because of its bluntness, should have only bruised Serge—could actually end up impaling him. Danny had an advantage here. He was big. Worked out. Played football in his spare time. Serge was small, a sparrow of a man.

Danny eased his hands under Serge's shoulders and lifted him clear of the lever. With the wound no longer blocked by the lever, blood flowed freely, dripped onto the platform, splattered Danny's running shoes. Danny looked at the lever, saw that the rust-weakened steel had been snapped clean at a knifelike angle, maybe years before, and that the break had left a spiky point.

He looked around as he held Serge up like a puppet. Blood covered the broken lever, the platform, and now his shoes. Step one, he decided, wasn't without its problems. What was he going to do about all this blood? He didn't have time to clean it up. He had to hurry. He was sweating, always sweated whenever he got anxious.

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He forced himself to think clearly; he had to move to step two before any of the other employees came looking for him.

He hoisted Serge to his shoulders the way he used to lift the girls down at the beach, only Serge didn't cooperate the way the girls did, didn't tense his body into a neat little barbell, wouldn't keep his legs together, let his head hang, his arms droop. The ridiculousness of the situation made Big Danny want to cry. Why did his boss have to be so awkward to carry? Why couldn't he just cooperate for a change?

Big Danny gave up trying to hoist Serge to his shoulders. Instead, he dragged his boss through the grass, blazing another huge trail, flattening yet more grass, getting the ground soaked in blood. He dragged his boss the same way a child drags a rag doll, Serge's head bumping against whatever obstacle happened to be in the way. By the time Danny got him to the fence, Serge's face had suffered several post-mortem bruises and scratches.

Danny lifted Serge as high as he could, no easy thing because Serge continued to behave like a stunt dummy. Danny pitched him over the fence. He heard something crack but didn't bother checking for broken bones. What was the point?

Just as he was dragging Serge the last little distance to the woods, he saw a flashlight shining out on the main path. How could they be here so soon? He ducked down in the grass and watched two figures emerge from the woods. One was Buzz; Danny recognized the way Buzz carried himself, shoulders straight, chest out, an old guy who had once been a sergeant in the San Diego Police Department. The other person was Karen. He knew it was Karen by the smell of her lilac perfume, carried to him on a breeze, a smell that made him dizzy with love.

He crouched there, his mind shut off, acting purely on instinct. He felt like a buck cornered in a forest during deer-hunting season. He was sure Buzz would find him. Buzz was smart. Buzz was sharp. Buzz had been a cop.

But Buzz and Karen continued toward the wrecking yard.

When Buzz and Karen were a safe distance away, Danny dragged Serge into the woods, at first slowly, quietly, not wanting to attract attention, but then more quickly, his panic taking over. He realized, too late, that he had gotten himself into something that he might not be able to get himself out of. The mosquitoes came out, attacked him in swarms, but he kept going. He glanced back through the trees and saw the distant beam of Buzz's flashlight probing in and around the car compressor. He increased his speed, made more of a racket, but didn't care; he wanted to get step two over with, to move on to step three.

At the marsh, he waded right in, pulled Serge in after him through the bulrushes, tripped over a submerged log, fell in, got

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up, gave Serge a good yank . . .

And stopped . . .

Froze.

As if he'd been hit by a stun gun.

Turned.

Realized his splashing must have caused a lot of noise.

Looked back at the wrecking yard. Saw Buzz's flashlight, like the distant beam of a train, pointing across the field through the trees right into the marsh, weak and diffuse, not strong enough to penetrate, but still pointing right at him.

"Danny?" Buzz called.

Danny stood there, not answering. Waiting. Hearing his own blood pump past his ears.

Finally the flashlight went out.

He looked at Serge. "Why do you always have to give me so much trouble?" he whispered. "You really bug me sometimes, you know that?"

At work on Monday, Serge's parking spot stayed empty.

Big Danny McPhail mowed the grass of the industrial parkland around the Intertech building on a John Deere tractor mower, and every time he passed Serge's parking spot, he had to look at it.

At ten-thirty, people came out of the office to have their coffee break at the Starbuck's across the street, and no one even looked at Serge's empty parking spot. To Danny, Serge's empty parking spot was as conspicuous as a solar eclipse. He wondered if anyone was saying anything about Serge's absence inside. He decided he would replace the paper towels in the washroom as a way to find out.

He went in the back way.

Once inside, he glanced past the water cooler, saw Buzz in his office, shirt sleeves rolled up, phone pressed to his ear, eyes glued to a spreadsheet on his computer. Like nothing had happened. He peered over the tops of the cubicles. Everyone was acting normal. None of them were even so much as glancing at Serge's closed office door.

He went to the washroom and filled the paper-towel dispenser. He looked at his face in the mirror and saw a dozen mosquito bites. He felt he had to do something to alleviate his anxiety.

He left the washroom and walked to the front of the office.

Karen sat at her desk, as pretty as a field of daisies, a telephone headset over her head, the microphone attachment curving around her mouth. She didn't look upset. She didn't look guilty. She looked like everybody else. Normal. He was beginning to feel the same way he sometimes felt at night school, as if the teacher had just made an important point, one that would be on the exam, and he was the only one who didn't get it.

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Karen finished talking on the phone and turned to him with a smile. "I know what you're here for," she said.

"You do?" he said, coloring to the roots of his hair.

"You're here to pick up your March of Dimes pledge form, aren't you?"

He stared at her in amazement. "Uh . . . no," he said.

He gazed at her closely, tried to see some guilt but saw nothing.

"Is everything all right?" she asked. "You look . . . tired."

"Where's Serge?" he asked. "I don't see him."

He thought he'd see a change in her eyes, but no change came. She clicked her mouse a few times, brought Serge's appointment schedule to the screen. "I have him downtown at head office for a meeting this morning," she said. She looked at him helpfully. "Do you need to see him? He'll have some time this afternoon. I can mark you in."

He didn't know what to make of this.

"About the game this Friday night . . ." he said. "I like a good game. You want to know why I like a good game?"

She looked away. "Yes, I know," she said. "Because it makes you feel like a new person." As if she were repeating the words by rote.

Had he already told her this? He suddenly felt embarrassed.

"Yeah," he said.

"I don't know, Danny," she said, looking as if the last thing she wanted to do was go to another game with him. "I don't think I can go to the game." She stared at her desk. "I think I might be doing something else that night."

He wanted to tell her what he had done for her, how he had hidden the body in the deepest part of the marsh, weighted it down with bonfire stones, done his best to protect her, but she didn't want to go to the game with him, and in the face of that, in the face of feeling like a fool, he found he could say hardly anything at all.

"Okay," was all he managed, and quickly retreated to his supply closet.

Serge didn't come to work in the afternoon, either.

"Serge never showed up?" Danny said to Buzz.

Danny slid his hands into his pockets, gazed at the wastebasket, confused by the whole situation.

"No," said Buzz. "We don't know where he is." Buzz leaned back in his chair, folded his hands over his stomach, and contemplated Danny from under his dark brow. "He never showed up at his meeting downtown this morning, either."

Danny stared at Buzz, surprised by how calm he was. Buzz really looked as if he had no idea what was going on.

"Maybe he's at home," suggested Danny.

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Buzz shook his head. "I called him at home," he said. "All I got was his answering machine."

Danny shifted from one foot to the other. "Well . . . did he call head office?" Danny felt suddenly warm. "Did he call us?"

"He didn't call anybody," said Buzz. "I phoned head office this morning and they said they hadn't heard from him." Buzz took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. "He's not answering his pages, either." He shook his head. "I sure hope nothing's happened to him."

Was Buzz trying to protect himself? Protect Karen?

"Maybe he was in an accident," said Danny.

Buzz shook his head. "I've checked with the police," he said. "They've had no accidents on the Shoreway or any of the other major routes." Buzz shrugged, raised his eyebrows, lifted his hands in a gesture of mystification. "We don't know what's happened to him, Danny," he said. "We'll just have to wait and see." Then Buzz's eyes softened. "Oh, and by the way," he said, "I hope I'm going to see you out on the *Blue Magnolia* tomorrow night. Bev is planning to barbecue quite a feast."

With all that blood around, Danny was beginning to think the marsh wasn't the best place to hide the body after all.

After work, he drove home, got his diving mask, his flippers, and a sheet.

On this weekday evening, the park, on the outskirts of town, was deserted. The sky glowed golden and the smell of clover hit him like a taste of honey.

Tall maples, poplar trees, and wild raspberries fringed the marsh. He stared at the black tealike water, amazed by his predicament. Three frogs sat in the shallows by the bulrushes and a half-dozen dragonflies darted over the surface like vintage biplanes. Who thought he would ever be diving for dead bodies?

He followed the water's edge to a clump of poplars, hid the sheet under some bushes, took off his shoes, shirt, and pants, and slipped into his bathing suit. He pulled on his diving mask and flippers and waded into the marsh.

He usually swam courageously, braved Lake Erie in even the stormiest weather, but today he was terrified. He swam to the middle, keeping on the surface, looking at the bottom through his mask. A school of minnows swam by. Water weeds strained up from the bottom, wavering and mournful. He swam out to the deepest part of the marsh, right to where he had dumped Serge on Saturday night, and dove.

At nine feet, his ears hurt from the pressure. At twelve, the light grew dim. The water felt soupy warm from the long hot summer. He prepared himself. Could there be any sight more gruesome

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than a dead body on the bottom of a marsh? In water this warm, and with the marsh so full of organisms, he wondered what shape Serge's body would be in.

He reached the bottom. He saw a dead turtle, shell only, cream-colored breastplate upward, glowing, body rotted away. He fought to hold his breath. His eardrums felt as if they were going to burst. He looked around, couldn't see Serge anywhere, swam a few more strokes, kicking to keep himself under, looked some more, but still couldn't see Serge.

He stayed down for another thirty seconds, found a lot of junk, but still couldn't find his boss.

He made several dives over the next two hours, waded through the shallows, checked the bulrushes, finally walked the perimeter of the marsh. He searched until dark.

No luck.

He didn't understand it. First Karen and Buzz pretended they knew nothing about the murder. Now the body of the victim was gone, as if maybe the whole thing hadn't happened after all. As if, like in night school, he had missed something here. He had a mystery here, and he'd never been good at solving mysteries.

Karen lived on the second floor of a duplex on a quiet residential street near Woodland Hills Park. Stairs led up the back to a covered balcony. Danny had to find out what was going on. He had to solve this mystery. As he climbed the stairs he ran his hand through his hair, found a piece of water weed, and threw it over the balcony railing. He tried to calm himself. He took a few deep breaths and knocked on the door.

Karen came to the door wearing a pink housecoat. She peered out the window, saw who it was, and opened the door. The balcony door opened right into her bedroom. "Danny," she said, her voice anything but thrilled. "What are you doing here?"

Danny heard classical guitar music playing on the CD player. Through her bedroom door he saw her kitchen. Candles, a half-finished bottle of wine, and the remains of a spaghetti dinner for two sat on her kitchen table.

He looked at her closely. "Are you alone?" he asked.

"Not really," she said.

"You mean you're with someone?" he asked redundantly.

"What do you want, Danny?" she asked.

"Who's here?" he asked.

She glanced over her shoulder. Her lips tightened. She was looking at someone behind the door. She turned back to him, her brown eyes showing nothing.

Buzz stepped into view from behind the door. Buzz wore a big white terry-cloth dressing gown. Buzz looked as if he had just had

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a shower. Danny didn't need anybody to spell it out for him. He was smart enough to understand what was going on here.

"Danny, son, I think you'd better go home," said Buzz.

The jealousy Danny felt hurt so much he could hardly breathe. Buzz was the only one who knew he loved Karen. Buzz was the one who had helped him get Karen to go to the game with him. And now *this?*

"What about your wife?" Danny asked Buzz in a weak voice.

"Bev knows," said Buzz.

"Danny . . ." Karen's voice sounded tentative. "I know you think this isn't right, but I . . ." She made the noises of dismissal. "You should try dating someone younger." The words didn't matter at all, she could say anything she pleased, because he knew what was going on here, how he had been deceiving himself all along. "I thought you were dating Sandy Kavanaugh a few months back," said Karen.

"What about Serge?" he asked recklessly. "What are we going to do about Serge?"

Buzz stepped forward, chest out, chin up, eyes like bullets. "Danny," he said. "I think you'd better go home. We're tired. We want to go to bed. You're tired, too. And you're upset. We all have to go to work tomorrow. Go home. We'll talk about Serge tomorrow. In fact, why don't we talk about him tomorrow night, out on the *Blue Magnolia?"* he said. "I don't think the office would be the right place, anyway. We'll talk about him out there, you can have some burgers and I can show you something I've been meaning to show you." Buzz grinned in a calming way. "I'm sure you'll find it interesting."

The *Blue Magnolia* stretched sixty feet from stem to stern. Big Danny stood at the rail glancing around, feeling out of place. Several coworkers socialized at the back of the boat. He wanted to join them, fit in, but in order to do that he had to talk, and he'd never been a great talker. Buzz gave the helm to a young accountant from head office. Bev Spiegel tended burgers on the barbecue, a martini in her hand. She drank a lot. Sandy Kavanaugh, the woman he had dated a few months ago, stood at the bow looking at the Cleveland skyline. When she saw Danny, she waved, smiled.

Big Danny waved back, but he knew it wasn't a good wave.

Buzz came over and offered him a cold beer. Danny tried to be as polite as he could, but still felt hurt, confused; he hadn't come to any conclusions about anything, and still didn't know what they were going to do about Serge.

"Isn't Karen here?" he asked.

Buzz looked away. "No," he said. "She thought she'd better not come." Danny and Buzz looked at the lake for a while. "Do you get out on the lake much?" asked Buzz.

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"Not much." The Cleveland skyline receded behind them, a mile away. "I used to go down to the beach a lot. Me and my buddies used to hang out there a lot."

Buzz nodded. "I go fishing here sometimes," he said. "When I first moved to Cleveland in the nineteen seventies, the fish were all dead. But they've really come back in the last decade or so. I fish for lake trout. You ever fish for lake trout?"

"No."

"You have to know where to find them, Danny. That's the trick. They like to swim about ninety feet down." He glanced out at the lake. "And this up here—this section of lake—this is where you'll find them a lot of the time. It's at least ninety feet deep here, even deeper in spots. In fact, this is what I wanted to show you. This part of the lake up here, where I fish for lake trout." The *Blue Magnolia* sliced cleanly through the waves. "You see the way it changes color here? The way it goes from green to blue? That really dark blue?"

Danny saw the change of color. "Yeah?" he said.

"I bought a depth-finder," said Buzz. "It's a little box, a sonar device, tells you how deep the water is, tells me where ninety feet deep is so I can troll for lake trout." Buzz turned to Danny. "This particular section up here, where it goes from green to blue like that . . . well, that's a trench down there. My little box tells me it drops from ninety feet to two hundred and ten feet, about as deep as Lake Erie gets."

Danny wondered what Buzz was getting at. "Yeah?" he said.

Buzz put his hands on his hips, stared at Danny, looked at Big Danny as if he were about to call him . . . unfixable. "It's a good place to dump a body, Danny," he said.

And left it at that. Kept staring out at the lake. Adding nothing. Letting Danny figure it out for himself. Danny tried to say something, felt his face turning red, sweat beading his forehead, but couldn't say anything at all. Buzz rested his hand on Danny's forearm.

"It's okay, Danny," said Buzz. "Relax."

They stood there for several seconds. Buzz finally took a deep breath and leaned forward, putting his elbows on the rail.

"Before I came to Cleveland," he said, "before I got into the software business . . ." He nodded, as if he were remembering his life before Cleveland. "Before all that, I used to be a police officer with the San Diego Police Department. I think I told you that."

"Yeah, you did," said Danny.

Buzz glanced at Danny, smiled, his eyes softening. "We had this one case. A young woman. She was attacked by a man. She accidentally kills this man while she's trying to protect herself. He's lying there dead and she's trying to figure out what she's going to

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do. She thinks it through. She finally decides she can't be charged with his death because it's an accidental death, an accidental homicide. She thinks the best thing she can do is run and get help." Buzz shook his head. "But while she's away a friend decides he's going to move the body. Hide it. So she won't get into trouble. Which was very nice of him, but just the wrong thing to do."

A particularly large wave slapped the side of the boat, sending spray over the bow. Buzz continued.

"He moves the body, hides it in this swamp, but leaves evidence all over the place. Doesn't clean up after himself. Doesn't know any better. Doesn't realize that he's really put this young woman in serious jeopardy by moving the body." Buzz peered at Danny closely. "Because he moves the body, she ends up getting into trouble. If it's an accidental homicide, why would she move the body? See, that's what the police thought. They thought she was the one who moved the body." He peered even more closely at Danny. "And why would she move the body if she had accidentally killed the guy in self-defense? Her story didn't work for us anymore because the body had been moved. So we charged her. Even when this friend came forward to tell us that *he'd* been the one to move the body, we figured he was just trying to get her out of jail. You see what I'm saying, Danny?"

"Yeah."

"Too bad this friend didn't have somebody to clean up after him," said Buzz. "Too bad he didn't have a friend who could dump the body someplace like Lake Erie. That would solve at least part of the problem."

Danny felt his blood quickening. "What do you mean by that?"

"The police would still have a missing body, wouldn't they? Say the person who dumped the body in the swamp for this woman was my friend. And I happened to be the guy who went in and cleaned up after him at the swamp. Say I happened to be the guy who dumped the body in Lake Erie for him so he wouldn't get in trouble. You know what I'd tell this friend?"

"What?" asked Danny.

"I'd tell him to stay out of it from now on. I'd tell this friend that if and when some investigating detectives come around and start asking questions—and trust me, Danny, they will—I'd tell him to let me do the talking. I know the way cops think. I know what to say. I'd say to this friend, let me handle it. That way, no one would get hurt. The way it should have been in the first place."

Buzz left Danny to ruminate on his mistakes. Sandy Kavanaugh joined him. Now that it was all over, now that Danny finally understood that Buzz wasn't talking about some hypothetical situation in San Diego from a long time ago but about what had actu-

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ally happened out at the park on Saturday night, he was as hungry as a horse. He was a big man and could easily eat three hamburgers and a plate of potato salad.

"The lake's beautiful, isn't it?" said Sandy.

Danny wasn't sure how to respond, now that he knew Serge was down there.

"Uh . . . yeah," he said.

They stood next to each other, neither of them talking. Seagulls circled high overhead. The lake smelled of algae, like it always did whenever it got too warm. Soupy warm. With a lot of organisms growing in it, feasting on whatever was down there . . .

He glanced at Sandy. All he wanted to do was go to a game. A game would fix things.

"You want to go to the game with me this Friday night?" he asked.

She glanced at him, smiled tentatively. "Okay," she said.

He nodded. "You know what I like about a game?" he asked.

A few mallards swam by.

"What?" she asked.

He grinned from ear to ear, knowing for sure he had never told her this before. "I always feel like a new person after a game," he said.

And, truth to tell, Big Danny was about ready to feel like a new person.

But for now, he and Sandy moved to the barbecue, where Danny got his three burgers and his plateful of potato salad. ●

"We Have Another Cell Phone Assault!"

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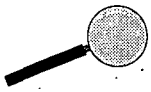

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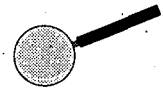

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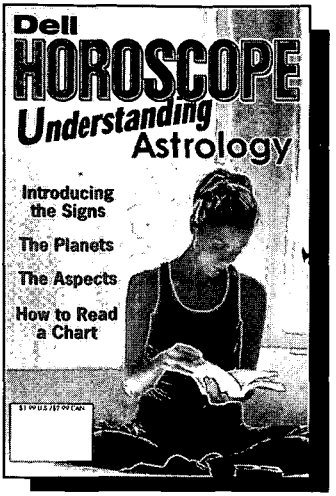

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